The New Criterion

February 1990

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *February 1990*

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Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* has been published by North Point Press.

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Notes & Comments: February 1990

Doing the multicultural blues

The word "multicultural" is much with us, and not the least interesting thing about its popularity is just what it means. The *OED Supplement*, that indispensable guide to newer words and usages, defines "multicultural" as "of or pertaining to a society of varied cultural groups." Like most present-day uses of "culture," this definition conflates sociology with civilization and anthropology with art and learning. Nonetheless, it expresses a truth about the United States: we are indeed a nation of many peoples, different in origin, character, and style, and we are the product of the contributions of all these disparate origins, characters, and styles.

But users of this new buzzword for the 1990s are hardly content with describing our national past or even our present. For today's flock of multiculturalists, "multicultural" is taken to convey a mélange of desirable attitudes about the direction of American society and its traditions, learning, and art. Evidence as to the nature of the road upon which we are urged to travel, along with the usual exaltation of folkways as art, can be found in *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, a collection of previously published articles appearing now as the fifth of the *Graywolf Annual* series. Here, under the subtitle "Opening the American Mind," is a concatenation of Native American, Afro-American, Latino, Asian, and even nostalgically Luddite White writing; here are all the familiar descriptions, predictions, and prescriptions, including an account by the late James Baldwin of the American "criminal conspiracy to destroy" black children, a disquisition by Carlos Fuentes on the nobility of sympathizing with Mexico while living abroad with the international rich and famous, an evocation by Wendell Berry of the joys of farming with horses rather than tractors, and (by lesser-known writers) a paean to Indian gynocratic societies of the Southwest, a Jamaican lesbian's attack on the British for having imposed their values on her education, and a short memoir by a Japanese American, married to a white pediatrician, who does not feel he will be able (for reasons of suffering conscience) to use black help in caring for the children he and his wife may one day have.

What unites all these indictments, of course, is hatred: hatred for white men, for America, for Europe, for the West that is now seen to rule the world, and for the Western civilization that made this despised triumph possible. Sometimes the hatred takes the childish form (in the words of an article in *The Graywolf Annual*) of "spitting into their cultural soup"; sometimes it sympathizes with, though never quite endorses, the violent ideology of Frantz Fanon. As the objects of this hatred, we quite rightly react: as the old French saw goes,

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"This animal is very mischievous; when it is attacked, it defends itself." And so a bitter conflict is now going on between the defenders of the Euro-American West on the one hand and the multiculturalists on the other.

A large part of this worldwide conflict is political and legal; some of it spills over into acts of anti-Western terrorism. At home, much of this conflict, and not the least important part, is concerned with ideas; as the hostilities of *The Graywolf Annual* amply demonstrate, the battlefields of this conflict have been, and remain, the faculties and curricula of American colleges and universities, the programs of museums, theaters, and concert halls, and the offerings of the media. There are now fresh signs that the government agencies in Washington—in particular the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities—are being swept up in the struggle.

There can be no doubt that the present moment calls for a vigorous and spirited defense of America as one nation, of our European inheritance, and of the ideals of the West that we in America—all of us, whatever our origins—have striven to represent. But at the same time that we fight for what will inevitably be called Western civilization, we must realize that we are defending more than the West and its traditions: we are also defending the many strands of other civilizations that have gone into the making of the West.

When we defend the West, we must go on to defend the very idea of civilization as something irreducible to the social sciences. What is great about the contribution of the West to the world is not its particularism, but the possibilities it has envisioned of the universality of scientific and liberal knowledge, of citizenship and freedom—indeed, of the universality of humanity. It is one of the glories of the West that it has preserved so much of the high civilizations of other societies which would otherwise have vanished through neglect and worse. In the most important sense, the great line from Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome to our century is not a conception of ethnicity, but a conception of humanity that transcends ethnicity.

Unlike the sour hatreds of *The Graywolf Annual*, the fight today, now as in the past, in Eastern Europe and in China, is not just a fight for the values of the West, but a fight for the universal values that the West has brought—however incompletely—into reality. We must make clear that in defending the West and its civilization, we are defending all civilizations.

A no-fault criticism for the Nineties?

It looks as if we are going to need a new term to describe the art criticism of the 1990s. It is not simply that the 1980s witnessed the proliferation—and enthusiastic critical support—of an extraordinary amount of bad art. By the end of the decade, the very notion that art ought to be judged by aesthetic criteria was denounced as a form of political repression, and the concept of artistic quality was banished to the realm of forbidden ideas. What we can presumably look forward to in the Nineties, then, is an official school of no-fault art criticism—as it might be called—that substitutes for all artistic considerations what are now to be regarded as "ethical" or "philosophical" issues.

For this new school of criticism there is to be only one basis on which art can be judged, and that is its adequacy or relevance "to a troubled society in a changing world," as one of the critics of this persuasion recently put it. It must not be supposed, however, that just any old "ethical" or "philosophical" issue will be thought adequate to the needs of the moment. A prescribed index of acceptable issues for works of art to be "about" has been offered

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as a guide: "ecology, AIDS, feminism, ethnic identity, homelessness, the media, and so on." In other words, the issues that now dominate the mass media's coverage of American society. This list, by the way, is not taken from some left-wing journal or maverick art review but from an expensively produced exhibition catalogue published by one of our blue-chip dealers in contemporary art reputations.

Still another votary of this new mode of criticism has lately suggested that a certain form of art—easel painting, in this case—must now be understood to be an essentially male chauvinist enterprise, and for that reason denied the prestige that it has traditionally enjoyed. According to this view, easel painting "conjures up an image of a male presence dominating the canvas as his penile brush violates its white passiveness." Easel painting, in short, is now to be considered little more than a scenario of rape, which means (among much else) that anyone—man or woman—who continues to work in this tainted medium is deemed to be complicit in the subjugation of women. Somehow—we are never told on what "ethical" or "philosophical" basis—certain female artists who still work in the easel-painting medium are to be exempted from censure; but they have now been put on notice about the dangers implicit in the art they practice.

What needs to be noted about this no-fault art criticism is its role in the art market. While it makes large claims for itself as a form of social criticism that allegedly challenges the assumptions of our society, it serves—and is largely meant to serve—as a vehicle for the promotion of the most fashionable art now dominating the commercial galleries and the museums and private collections that follow the lead of the galleries. There is no mystery, of course, as to why big-ticket dealers in contemporary art should wish to embrace this criticism, which consigns to oblivion the very notion that a good deal of what they are offering their affluent clients might, after all, be the sheerest rubbish. To be free of the burden of aesthetic judgment makes the dealers' task and that of the artists they show infinitely easier than it would otherwise be. A criticism that agrees in advance and on principle to find no aesthetic fault with the objects of its scrutiny can be counted upon not only to support new fashions in art but also—owing to the "ethical" considerations that have now supplanted aesthetic judgment in this criticism—to do so in the name of improving the world.

Nothing quite like this has happened in American art criticism since the 1930s, when a similar wave of anti-aesthetic sentiment swamped the scene under the aegis of "social consciousness." That movement, too, while on the one hand (like this new criticism) essentially political in content, had an important market function and succeeded in fostering a lot of bogus reputations. The ostensible issues have changed, of course—then artists were required to base their art on the imperatives of "anti-fascism," American nativism, etc., whereas now it is demanded that they adopt feminism, AIDS, homelessness, et al., as their causes—and the financial stakes are now much greater. But the same cynicism and the same failure of taste prevail.

It is disheartening to think that in the 1990s we are likely to see a wholesale re-enactment of this assault on aesthetic values in the art world, but that is the direction in which we seem at the moment to be moving. We may take some solace, however, in the fact that it is only on the basis of its aesthetic value that any work of art survives the fashions—including the political fashions—of the moment. This will prove to be as true for the so-called "ethical" and "philosophical" art now swamping us as it was for the bulk of the art that claimed to be "about" class struggle and the American scene half a century ago.

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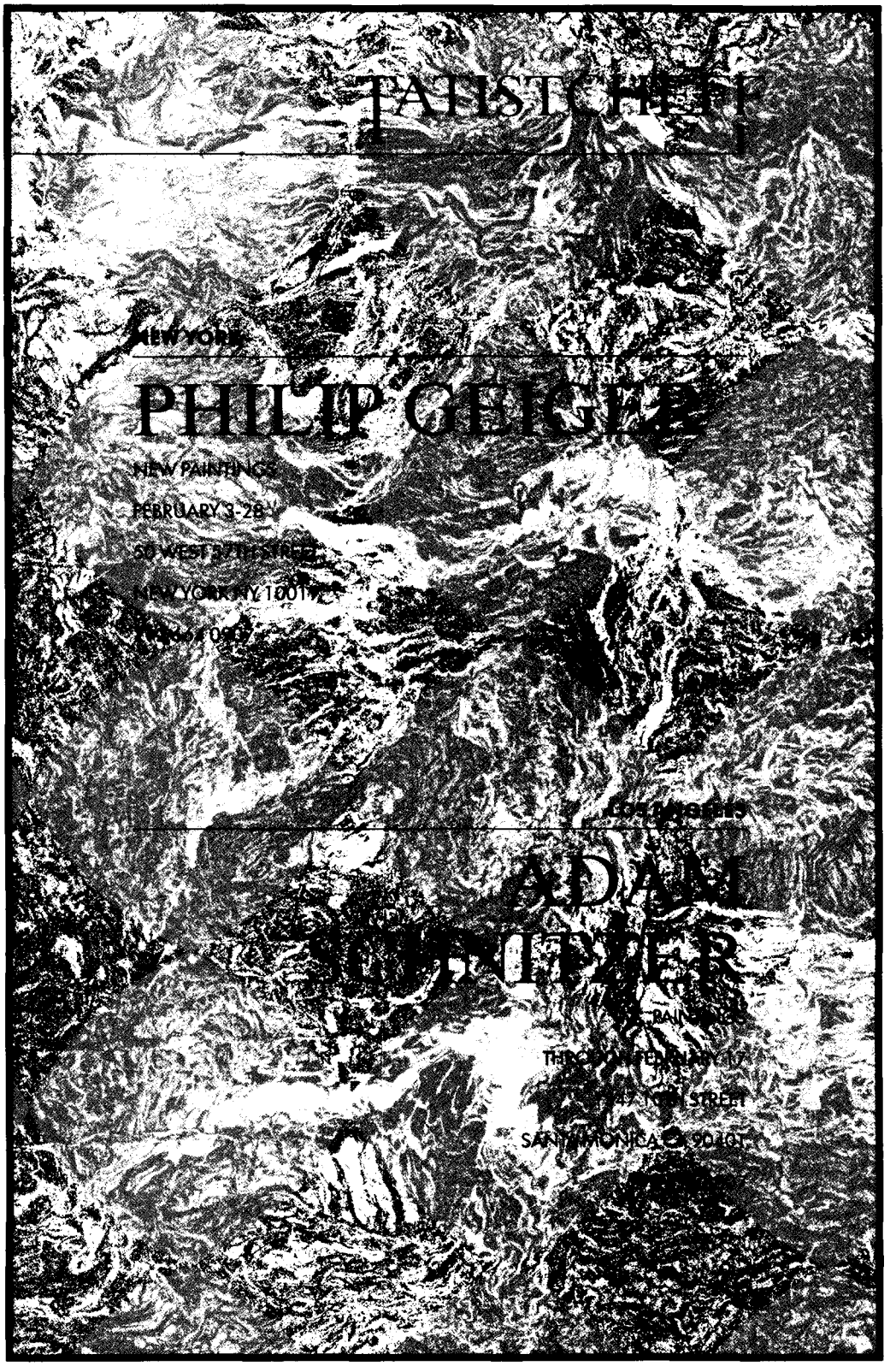

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Cynthia Ozick's farewell to T. S. Eliot—and high culture

by Hilton Kramer

A story is a hypothesis, a tryout of human nature under the impingement of certain given materials; so is an essay . . . . Nearly every essay, like every story, is an experiment, not a credo.

Or, to put it more stringently: an essay, like a story or a novel, is a fiction . . . . What I am *repudiating . . . is the inference that . . . an essay is generally anything more than simply another fiction—a short story told in the form of an argument, or a history, or even (once in a very great while) an illumination. But never a tenet.*
—Cynthia Ozick, in the "Forewarning" to *Metaphor & Memory: Essays*

Her performance of the part she had undertaken to play was certainly complete, and everything lay before him but the reason she might have for playing it.
—Henry James, in *The Princess Casamassima*

In a season remarkably devoid of literary events capable of causing a stir, the ferocious attack on T. S. Eliot mounted in the pages of *The New Yorker* by Cynthia Ozick has come as something of a shock.[1] Its effect has been that of an act of intellectual violence, an act intended to annihilate its object, and it was no doubt for that reason that it so swiftly succeeded in causing the great stir that it has. Here was a polemic of a kind not seen in the literary world for many years—a lengthy and unremitting assault on what had once been a major reputation. It is my impression that readers responded to this assault, both to its novelty and to its ferocity, with a feeling of excitement mingled with an attitude of curiosity and bewilderment. The excitement was of a kind that inevitably attaches to any attempt to topple a monument; the curiosity and bewilderment, however, had much to do with the question of whether there was still a monument there to be toppled. Hadn't Eliot virtually disappeared as an object of thought in the literary world? Could one point to a single significant writer under the age of forty whose poetry or criticism could be said to reflect his direct influence—or even an awareness of his existence? It is true, to be sure, that Eliot had lately been the subject of a good deal of biographical revelation and documentation. But when a major writer passes into the hands of the biographers, we can usually assume—in modern times at least—that his *literary* influence is all but extinct, and this certainly has been the case with Eliot. In this country the centenary of his birth last year went unmarked by much in the way of ceremony or celebration—a circumstance that would have been unimaginable in an earlier era. For decades Eliot had bestrode the literary world as a colossus, but now he had disappeared from that world almost without trace. As Miss Ozick herself wrote in her *New Yorker* essay, "we do know for certain that we no longer live in the literary shadow of T. S. Eliot." Given the

1 "T. S. Eliot at 101," by Cynthia Ozick; *The New Yorker*, November 20, 1989, pages 119-154.

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kind of shadows that now darken the literary landscape, this is not a development to be celebrated, I think—and even Miss Ozick sounds at times a little rueful—but there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that the situation will soon be reversed. For the time being, anyway, Eliot is gone—gone, that is, as a writer who is really felt to matter here and now by any identifiable community of literary artists. It is this fact that gave to Miss Ozick's polemic the look of an assault on a fortress that had long been vacated.

That there might be something more involved in this polemic than a desire to discredit a writer who is no longer a threat even to those, like Miss Ozick, who harbor so many unappeased grievances against him, was apparent, I think, to anyone who paid close attention to the other subjects she had marshaled on this occasion as the targets of her attack. In the excitement attending the assault on Eliot himself these accessory targets might easily be overlooked, but I believe it would be a mistake to do so. For it was in them that the true ground of this attack on Eliot is most distinctly discernible, and once we have grasped what that ground is—and what the implications of this attack upon it may be for the future—we shall be a lot closer to understanding the nature of this strenuous effort to bury a reputation already so denuded of status and influence.

These accessory targets—all related to each other and to Eliot and his work—were principally three: modernism, the New Criticism, and what Miss Ozick herself described in the final words of her essay as "the power and prestige of high art." Except for the New Criticism, which is now—to our misfortune—as extinct as a literary force as Eliot himself, these remain very live targets indeed despite the widespread campaign that for some years has been devoted to their destruction. It is because they are very much alive, moreover, that Miss Ozick's polemic could claim a topicality it would not otherwise have had. It is no longer news, after all, that Eliot was anti-Semitic or that in his political writings he had often expressed a yearning for a closed society and an organic culture that placed him at odds with the principles and practices of a liberal democracy—issues that Miss Ozick revives as if she had something new and startling to say about them, which, it turns out, she does not. All of this side of Eliot had long been known to his readers, and, with few exceptions, had long ago been rejected by them. (Oddly enough, of the latest of the very rare attempts to defend Eliot in this regard—Christopher Ricks's new book on *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*—she makes no mention.[2]) When she writes at the close of her essay that "it is now our unsparing obligation to disclaim the reactionary Eliot," one has to wonder to whom Miss Ozick is addressing her appeal, for "the reactionary Eliot" had long been disclaimed by the literary world that nonetheless found reason enough to embrace him as a poet and critic of exceptional importance.

Is it really possible for a writer of Miss Ozick's intelligence and seriousness not to know all this about a subject upon which she has obviously lavished an immense labor? I doubt it, and must therefore assume that she has chosen on this occasion to preach to the converted as a literary strategy—a strategy designed to strip Eliot of whatever authority might still be attached to his diminished renown and, by extension, to include within the boundaries of her indictment whatever deficiencies and delinquencies (real or imagined) that might now be ascribed to modernism, to the aspirations of high art, and to the New Criticism which served as the vehicle of their elucidation.

Miss Ozick writes, as she surely knows, in a cultural climate and in a cultural marketplace in which modernism, though still very much alive, is nonetheless imperiled and under sustained attack; a climate and a marketplace in which the aspirations of high art are mocked and subverted by the agencies

2 *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, by Christopher Ricks; University of California Press, $25. My review of this book will be published in the March 1990 number of *Commentary*.

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and institutions—criticism, the museums, the academy—that formerly served as their champions and custodians. Indeed, she enters the debate on these issues very late in the day, at an hour when the defense of high art is a beleaguered minority position on the cultural scene and the enemies of modernism command enormous patronage and influence. All of this, as I say, Miss Ozick surely knows. That she has chosen this moment in which to surrender to this headlong drive to consign modernism to the ash heap of history and join forces with the campaign to discredit the purposes of high art is, I think, an ominous development in our cultural life and an unhappy augury for Miss Ozick herself. For as a writer Miss Ozick is, or at least has been until now, a representative of the modernist literary culture she so vehemently repudiates in this essay. Like Eliot—need we remind her?—she has also been a writer who places great emphasis on tradition and on religion, though not, of course, Eliot's tradition and Eliot's religion, and it is difficult to believe that she will be able to jettison these deeply felt pieties, heretofore so fundamental to her writing, without undergoing a significant change in her artistic outlook. That she is not yet entirely at ease with her new position is evident enough in the litany of regrets that is scattered throughout her essay—regrets that are voiced with an air of acceptance and resignation but with none of the animus that is reserved here for Eliot and his "elitist" standards. "The etiolation of high art seems to me to be a major loss," she writes, as if so momentous an event could be considered foregone and she, as a writer, had no role to play in its resolution. "High art is dead," she writes without question or protest. "The passion for inheritance is dead. Tradition is equated with obscurantism. The wall that divided serious high culture from the popular arts is breached: anything can count as 'text.'" And again: "music is not wanted, history is not wanted, idea is not wanted. Even literature is not much wanted," she writes, as if she were reporting on the course of a civilization other than her own. Whatever doubts or disquiet Miss Ozick may actually feel in the face of this fateful reversal in our cultural life remain unconfided and undefended while she prepares to lend the weight of her considerable talents to supporting the *Kulturkampf* that is now upon us.

In her *New Yorker* valediction to Eliot and his now despised conception of high art—"absolute art . . . when art was at its most serious and elitist"—Miss Ozick resorts, albeit without acknowledgment, to a very old argument of a kind that in the past we would not have thought her capable of countenancing. It is what might be called the Whitmanesque argument, though in this century it was codified and popularized not by a poet but in the writings of the literary historian Van Wyck Brooks. First adumbrated in *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* (1925) and then elaborated and embellished in Brooks's five-volume chronicle of American literary life, this argument held that there was something essentially unnatural, and certainly something un-American, in the attempt to create a "high art" of literature in the United States. Such a literature was believed to be inimical to our democratic ethos and therefore damaging—morally damaging—to our national life. In this historical scenario, modernism was the great enemy—the evil serpent that had somehow insinuated itself into our American Eden and corrupted the purity and innocence of our native culture. Modernism was held to be "foreign," difficult, and divisive—what we should now call elitist—and was on that account thought to be responsible for many of our national ills. In truth, Brooks harbored as great a yearning for an organic culture, though not Eliot's conception of an organic culture, as Eliot himself ever did. But in Brooks's liberal-utopian vision of American culture, Eliot and his conception of high art could have no place. (The New Criticism was similarly placed on the index of alien practices.) A triumphal nativism—the literary equivalent of those WPA post office murals that were produced to so much acclaim in the heyday

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of Brooks's fame—was offered as an authentic American alternative to this foreign toxin.

When Miss Ozick writes as follows at the conclusion of her essay on Eliot, the echoes of Brooks and his philistine cohorts are alarmingly familiar to anyone with a sense of history:

> . . . it may be simply that it is in the renunciatory grain of America to resist the hierarchical and the traditional. Eliot's "high culture" and its regnancy in and beyond the American university may have been an unsuccessful transplant that "took" temporarily but in the end would be rejected by the formation of natural tissue.

So Eliot and the modernism he is made to represent in this argument are to be considered the cultural equivalent of a failed organ transplant from an alien race. In making this pernicious analogy, Miss Ozick never troubles to tell us what, in her view, the "natural tissue" of American culture might now consist of. Whose work is to be deemed admissible by such a standard? Mark Twain's, I suppose—but Wallace Stevens's? There is a suggestion in her essay, never fully developed, that Miss Ozick's former literary idol, Henry James—like Eliot, a polyglot American expatriate who became a British subject—might no longer qualify; whereas Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"—"the single poem most representative of the break with Eliot"—probably would. We can only wonder whether Miss Ozick's own contributions to American literature, with their obvious debt to a Jewish tradition neither indigenous nor widely shared, will be able to pass muster in the tests that such a theory of "natural tissue" would inevitably invite. It strikes me, in any event, as unseemly for a writer of Miss Ozick's background and outlook to be trafficking in ideas of this sort—ideas that would have us believe that some of our writers belong more "naturally" than others to our national literature, and it is exceedingly odd, if not indeed grotesque, to see such ideas advanced in the name of what Miss Ozick herself invokes as "the principles of democracy, tolerance, and individualism." Offended by what she describes, not incorrectly, as Eliot's vision of an "exclusionary society," Miss Ozick in turn makes a case for excluding Eliot—and much else besides—from our democratic culture, a maneuver that, if allowed to succeed, would leave our literature and our lives permanently impoverished.

It is not only as an "unsuccessful transplant" that Eliot and his "high culture" are rejected by Miss Ozick. She is also determined to depict the man himself as an irredeemable reprobate, a moral leper whose poetry is nothing more than an artfully concealed confession of unforgivable derelictions. For this purpose she has ransacked the biographical literature for whatever charges might be brought against this miscreant, who, by means of subterfuge and sordid ambition, somehow persuaded the world to believe that he was a great poet. What is adduced from the biographies is made to serve as a guide to and touchstone of the poetry, as if art had no other purpose than to reveal or conceal the moral forfeitures of its creators. That a work of art might transcend the conditions of its creation and acquire an existence and a meaning quite separate from the life that produced it, is nowhere acknowledged in Miss Ozick's headlong attempt to reduce every line of Eliot's poetry to a crass biographical datum. In this effort we see reflected not only the extreme degree to which our entire literary culture is nowadays addicted to the practice of substituting biographical speculation for critical thought—a practice that very often amounts to little more than the substitution of gossip for intelligence—but the habit of placing criticism itself at the service of an unmasking function that treats every work of art as a strategy of subterfuge. Although Miss Ozick herself appeared to disavow this practice in the "Forewarning" with which she prefaced her own recent volume of critical essays, *Metaphor & Memory*, going so far as to claim that even her criticism was to

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be read as "simply another fiction"—as if this curious assertion had any chance of forestalling the kind of unmasking of her own work she might understandably find distasteful—she has nonetheless embraced the worst features of this reductive approach to criticism in writing about Eliot.

Which is why, I think, she brings such animus to her discussion of the New Criticism. For it was the governing assumption of this school of criticism that the poem on the page is to be read as something more than—as something other than—the sum of its autobiographical parts; that poetry enters our experience as a quite differenct mode of revelation, and at its best, as R. P. Blackmur once famously wrote, "adds to the stock of available reality." Because for Miss Ozick there is now no reality in Eliot's poetry that can be separated from a devious strategy of moral concealment—she makes much of what she calls "the masking power of the objective correlative"—she feels it necessary to revive the subject of the New Criticism solely for the purpose of discrediting it anew, discrediting it now precisely on the grounds of its support of what she calls "high art in literature." The "reverence for high art" fostered by the New Criticism is, she writes, "now antiquated—or dead." Are we to take her own essay on Eliot, then, with its wholesale rejection of artistic standards and its unremitting assault on Eliot's character, his career, and even his church, as well as his poetry, as an example of what remains alive and enlightened in our culture? Presumably we are, for there is much about Miss Ozick's polemic that has the air of a manifesto—a declaration of principles.

But if we are to take her essay as such an example, then it means that the vitality of our literary culture must now be thought to reside in this lethal combination of biographical analysis and political demolition that Cynthia Ozick has made the basis of her attack on a great poet and a great literary period. It means that literary criteria are to be banished not only from criticism but from literature itself. If we are really henceforth to judge our poets—and indeed all artists—solely by tests of character and politics, examining this writer for the way he treated his wife or that one for the exact degree of his support of a social ideology we can abide, then we shall soon find ourselves engaged in an endless purge of the finest talents. It isn't only Eliot (or Pound) who will be found wanting by the standards Miss Ozick lays down in her essay. William Butler Yeats was more of a fascist than Eliot ever was, and Wallace Stevens no less anti-Semitic or elitist. Shaw will have to go, and Dostoevsky, too. The dossiers will grow fat with the data of incrimination as our literary culture degenerates into an auto-da-fé of immense proportions—and all under the banner of "democracy, tolerance, and individualism." I trust that Miss Ozick is no more eager than I am to see such a catastrophe befall us, but she has already done a good deal in this essay to abet its development.

As for reading her essay on Eliot as "simply another fiction"—well, there *is* a sense in which Miss Ozick's whole analysis of Eliot and modernism is a fiction, but not the kind of fiction she had in mind in her preface to *Metaphor & Memory*. This notion of the critical essay as "simply another fiction"—a short story told in another form—is the sheerest cant, and very fashionable cant, too. We must "never" read her essays for "a tenet," Miss Ozick warns, yet her essay on Eliot is so overtenanted with tenets that there is hardly room in it for anything else. Eliot will survive this assault, as he has survived others, for his poetry and criticism are as permanent an addition to our literature as anything in the language. But whether Miss Ozick will survive this descent into literary assassination with her reputation intact remains to be seen. When the excitement caused by this polemic subsides, it will more clearly be seen to harbor a vein of intellectual intolerance and misplaced rectitude not heretofore discernible in her carefully crafted writing, and she will be judged accordingly. Her days as a sainted literary figure, anyway, are over.

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Raymond Williams in retrospect

by Maurice Cowling

Between 1965 and 1985 there was a major transformation of the English intellectual Left, as R. H. Tawney and Archbishop Temple were forgotten, C. A. R. Crosland and Roy Jenkins were edged aside, and a new body of sages has delivered a more uncompromising and more revolutionary message in their place.

Of these sages, Raymond Williams, Eric Hobsbawm, and E. P. Thompson were the most important. All three are or were "tenured radicals," all three used academic subjects as instruments of persuasion—literature in Williams's case, history in the other two cases—and all three had a stimulating effect on the English student revolutionaries of the late 1960s and their successors as these came to maturity without the restraint and respectability that the English student revolutionaries of the 1930s had acquired through participation in the "just and unavoidable war against fascism."

Williams (1921-1988) earned his first reputation from the publication of *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* in 1958. But it was through the student revolution that he achieved fame, not only in England but also in the United States, where he has had as devoted a following as in England. Indeed, his American followers have been more devoted, since none of them has been as disrespectful as the literary critic Terry Eagleton, his most distinguished follower in England and now his memorialist,[1] who in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), along with much praise, made withering criticism of Williams's "pragmatism," "muted intellectualism," and "residual populism," of his "provincialism," "humanism," and "idealism," and of the deplorable "parody" he had given of the "classic relations between the revolutionary and the proletariat."[2]

Williams adapted himself sartorially to the revolution as readily as Eagleton did, borrowing as his symbols the duffle coat, the leather jacket, and the Mosley-ite black sweater in which he was photographed in 1982. But those who glamorize him as a proletarian should remember that modern England is a suburb in which rural working-class solidarity is anachronistic, and that Williams was in essence a "scholarship-boy"—one of the most important cultural categories in England in the last sixty years—who, like Mr. Enoch Powell, had risen through education but, unlike Mr. Powell, felt guilt about his elevation.

In the 1970s and 1980s Williams came to stand for feminism, ecology, Welsh nationalism, and for the armed struggle against imperialism in the Third World. In

1 *Raymond Williams, Critical Perspectives*, edited by Terry Eagleton; Northeastern University Press, 235 pages, $35.

2 From *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, by Terry Eagleton (New Left Books, pages 32-35).

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the 1950s and early 1960s—before he was carried away by the euphoria of the student revolution—he was symbolized by his schoolmaster's tweeds; he embodied an earnest, secular version of the inherited decencies and resentments of Welsh nonconformity and the Welsh Labour movement; and he had as his leading intellectual characteristic the amiable but slightly rancid seriousness of a believer in culture and literature who displayed a puritan, or Marxist, mistrust of anyone who had power or position in education, politics, and society.

From the mid-1960s Williams was in continuous demand, wrote more than he ought to have done, and found outlets for almost everything that he wrote. One result was an endless oeuvre which dealt in the broadest way with culture, language, politics, and society. Another was that he repeated himself, became both fluent and reminiscent, and finally assumed the rectitude of opinions that he had originally felt obligated to argue for. In the three volumes published since his death, there are interesting essays and addresses about the Labour Left and the Labour Party, about the significance of modernism, and about the connections between popular opinion and the "ordinariness of culture."[3] But "what he came to say"[4] has for so long been so obvious that only devoted disciples, hagiographers like Professor Alan O'Connor,[5] or mutually self-congratulatory old comrades like Professor Edward Said, who appears in both *The Politics of Modernism*[6] and the Eagleton memorial volume, will find very much to detain them.

Williams wrote at two levels—colloquially and self-confidently in confirming for audiences of his own persuasion the truths that they shared with him; opaquely and mistily in works that attempted to establish the truth and coherence of these persuasions. Intellectually he was without power; he wrote no work that persuaded by the cogency of its argument. His originality was an originality of manner: his achievement was to deploy ordinariness and reasonableness in recommending opinions that were neither ordinary nor reasonable, and that became entirely unreasonable in response to the nightmare of abnormality that swept the universities of the Western world when he was in his middle forties.

Williams's ideas were few and simple. They had all been stated by 1977 and, even at their most emphatic, involved either retreats from positions he had seemed to be occupying earlier or accommodations to climates created by others. He may, as Eagleton claimed, have had an "intuitive knack of pre-empting intellectual positions," but he was at least as good at picking up already existing positions, and it is difficult to believe that *Culture and Society* would have been as conservative as it was without the anti-revolutionary climate of the 1950s, or that the cultural Marxism of *Marxism and Literature* (1977) would have been achieved at all if others had not arrived at it earlier. It was also of first importance for Williams's reputation that the young in the mid-1960s were willing to hear from an attractive lecturer who had working-class credentials and active service as an officer attached to the Coldstream Guards, and that what they wanted to be told was that revolution could be justified morally and intellectually, and the caution of *Culture and Society* swept aside by the violence that was advocated in *Modern Tragedy* (1966).

Williams was the son of a rural Welsh railwayman and went from a Welsh grammar school to read the Cambridge English Tripos at the end of the 1930s. He became a member of the Communist Party in his first year as an undergraduate and collaborated with Eric Hobsbawm—an undergraduate contemporary—in writing a pamphlet in defense of the Russian invasion of Finland.

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3 *Resources of Hope*, by Raymond Williams, edited by Robin Gable; Verso, 334 pages, $50; $16.95 paper.

4 *What I Came To Say*, by Raymond Williams; Hutchinson Radius, 280 pages, $21.95.

5 *Raymond Williams, Writing, Culture, Politics*, by Alan O'Connor; Basil Blackwell, 180 pages, $39.95.

6 *The Politics of Modernism*, by Raymond Williams, edited by Tony Pinkney; Verso, 200 pages, $49.95.

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Two undergraduate years at Cambridge were followed by conscription into the British Army in 1941, active service as a tank officer during the Allied invasion of Europe, and a further undergraduate year at Cambridge when the war was over. After a short period spent editing small-circulation magazines in London, he settled first in Sussex and later in Oxford as a salaried lecturer for the Oxford Extra-Mural Delegacy (Oxford's organization for adult education), expounding for the benefit of (putatively) working-class audiences that trust in culture and mistrust of capitalism, and that belief in D. H. Lawrence which some Marxists and ex-Marxists shared with the followers of F. R. Leavis.

On joining the army, Williams seems to have lost touch with the Communist Party. Later he became a supporter of the Labour Party, but appears for a long time to have been interested less in the political than in the cultural objections to capitalism. After the Labour defeat at the general election of 1966, he resigned from the Labour Party in protest against the elitist cynicism or ruling-class character of Mr. Harold Wilson's leadership. In spite of resuming support for Labour later, he then became one of the half dozen or so freestanding Marxists who fostered the analytical outrage with which the English New Left and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament have embarrassed the Labour leaders, eased Mrs. Thatcher's way electorally, and made the Labour party as unelectable as like-minded Democrats have made successive Democratic presidential candidates in the United States.

From an early stage, Williams wanted to be a writer rather than a don and a novelist as well as a critic, and from his first period in Cambridge was a journalist and public speaker. Public speaking and small-circulation journalism remained with him for the rest of his life, along with an interest in film and television, while *Border Country* (1960)—his first and only tolerable novel—gave confusing insights into what he was trying to say morally and politically.

Border Country gave a low-keyed account of relations between a father and a son. Though it dealt with politics, it was dominated not by politics but by gratitude, nostalgia, and death, and by its account of the idyllic solidarity of a rural Welsh village. The novel resisted the idea that the meritocratic son or the entrepreneurial trade unionist were better than the dying railwayman, and there was an anti-intellectual implication that a natural, unreconstructed, conservative way of life was more real than the academic way of life which the son had adopted.

Border Country, though published later, was written at the same time as Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, which dealt with the academic problem from the academic end. But Amis had no experience he was willing to disclose in order to match the experience that Williams disclosed in *Border Country*, no yardstick except a satiric yardstick with which to compare a farcical university with the University of Oxford, and no more interest in explaining what he had learned from his mandarin education in Oxford than Williams had, as a novelist, in explaining what he had learned from his mandarin education in Cambridge.

In 1961 Williams returned to Cambridge for a third time, now as a lecturer (later a professor) in the Faculty of English. At the same time he became a fellow of Jesus College, to which he was brought by M. I. Finley, the American Marxist historian, who was a fellow of the college already. In a similar way, Williams himself was later to bring Eagleton, who, in five works published in his twenties in the atmosphere of Vatican II, expounded a liberationist Catholicism which, though it looked to "Marxist, Third-World, Black-power and Hippy intensity" for help in converting "monopoly capitalism" into a "just community," stood in contradiction to Williams's irreligion.

In a review of works by Eagleton and his collaborators in 1966, Williams gave a mistrustful welcome to "radical Catholicism's" attempt to "find Christ in the world." But nothing in the review or the rest of his writings suggests any interest in Christ or

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any wish to relate Christianity to the "civilized paganism" with which he half-identified himself then.

In Williams's writings religion scarcely existed, and it was a central principle that a "common language" was more important than a "common faith." At no point did he consider religion in its own terms, certainly not in *The Long Revolution* (1961), where it would have given backbone to boneless arguments, or in *The Country and the City* (1973), where the Church of England should have been of central significance, or in *Culture and Society*, where many of the thinkers discussed were obsessed by Christianity.

Williams's mind was historical and meditative rather than theoretical, and such standing as he had as a theorist derived from *Marxism and Literature*, in which he woke up to the fact that Lukacs, Gramsci, Plekhanov, Goldmann, Althusser, Benjamin, Barthes, Chomsky, Brecht, and Sartre (among others) had created a cultural Marxism, and that the amalgamation of linguistics, semiology, and Freudian psychology into "cultural materialism" had liberated Marxism from the "deformations" associated with Stalinist practice.

Marxism and Literature denied that Marxism was reductive, or that Marx and Engels had had a rigid belief in a base/superstructure model of culture. It underscored their emphasis on "creation and self-creation," questioned the idea that they had made a simple equation of the "social" with the "collective," and argued that Marxism could overcome the "reified" or "abstracted . . . psychological" conception of determination based on "isolated modes of production" which was said to have been forced on it by capitalist society.

What this meant was that thought and culture were to be understood not as "distortion" or "disguise," but as a Gramscian "hegemony" which "saturated the whole process of living" and came to exist "in the fibres of the self." And this was important, however obscurely expressed, because it suggested that theory could develop a "general consciousness within what was experienced as an isolated consciousness," and that "tradition," which orthodox Marxism had normally dismissed as inertly "superstructural," could now be seen to have been "the most evident" or "shaping expression" of "hegemonic pressures and limits." In other words, that "theory" could be exonerated from the charge of being ineffectual and could meet the perennial Marxist demand for criticism that would "change the world."

In the 1970s Williams was catching up—doing to Marxism what others had been doing in the 1950s and 1960s and what Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, and many others had been doing to Christianity between 1840 and 1880—ridding it of features that made it unacceptable to the modern mind. But just as Carlyle, Arnold, and other fellow-laborers had thrown out so much of dogmatic Christianity that nothing distinctively Christian was left, so *Marxism and Literature* threw out so much of dogmatic Marxism that what was left was either vacuous and banal or not distinctively Marxist.

In this connection, there is no need for conservative thought to be afraid of Marxism or to fail to turn its insights to advantage. To take only one example, the idea of hegemony—even of class hegemony as an element in culture—can be deeply illuminating so long as it is understood that hegemony, though distressing for those who wish to have hegemonic authority but are excluded from it, is necessary in the modern world not only in the interests of peace and stability but also, where historic liberties and equalities have been established, in the interests of liberty and equality.

Williams was too limp a thinker to understand this as either a Marxist or a conservative truth, and wobbled uneasily between wishing to protect intellectual autonomy within a Marxist or socialist consciousness and accepting Mao Tse Tung's vision of writers being absorbed into "new kinds of popular . . . collaborative

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writing." So much so that the more closely one looks at *Marxism and Literature*, the more difficult it is to see what was left of Marxism, beyond the name, once Williams's "complexities . . . tensions . . . shifts . . . uncertainties and confusions" had been applied to it as Carlyle and Arnold had applied theirs to Christianity.

If *Marxism and Literature* lacked bite and edge, it also carried Williams out of his depth. He had been much more in his depth in discussing the English situation that had led up to *Culture and Society* twenty years earlier. In *Culture and Society,* English society had been the victim of the cultural corruption of which Leavis had made himself the enemy, industrial society had been the enemy of both culture and community, and the English language—the only real guarantor of community—was being emasculated by the class-oriented imposition of Standard English. *Culture and Society* took the form of critical exposition of the social doctrine that Williams found in approximately fifty British thinkers since Burke, and in making his critical dispositions he worked with three conceptions. First, that English society before the eighteenth century had been "organic," however defective it had been in humanity; second, that the English thinkers with whom it dealt had been reacting primarily to the upheaval created by industrialization and democracy; and, finally, that "culture" had provided these thinkers with a "court of appeal" and a "scale of integrity" for evaluating the "way of life" and "driven impulse" of the new kind of society that had been "reaching for control." Burke and Southey from one side, and Owen and Cobbett from the other, were shown writing from their experience of "the old England" in criticism of the new. "One kind of conservative thinker" and "one kind of socialist thinker" were shown uniting subsequently to criticize laissez-faire ideology by reference to the life of society as a whole, and "organic" was declared to be a central term through which "Marxist thinking" and "conservative thinking" could identify "liberalism" as the common enemy in the 1960s. It was hardly surprising, in these circumstances, that William Morris was said to be "pivotal," since he, more than anyone else—according to Williams—had found a political role for art and culture in contrasting with established forms of life the possibility of an alternative form of life in the future.

In the closing pages of *Culture and Society* Williams made the first widely read statement of his political opinions, defending a "democratic attitude" against "fear and hatred" and inserting into the aging socialism of the 1950s a Luddite or Leavisite version of the resentments of the 1930s. Williams did not have to invent for himself the working-class persona which public-school Marxists like Auden and Spender (or an alienated Etonian like Orwell) had had to invent for themselves twenty-five years earlier, and he was thus in a better position to write sympathetically about the "ethic of service" and "real personal selflessness" which had been inculcated by the public schools, the professions, and the regular army. On the other hand, he attacked the scholarship "ladder" which working-class boys like himself had been able to "climb," denouncing it not only because it "sweetened the poison of hierarchy" but also because it pretended that the "hierarchy of merit" was different from the "hierarchy of birth and wealth," when in fact both were hierarchies (or elites) that were diminishing "community" and obstructing the "effort" that "every man" ought to make to value his own skill and the "skill of others."

In *Culture and Society* Williams did not advocate violent revolution, which it would have been ridiculous to do in England in 1958. What he said instead was that democracy was "in danger," that there was a "sullenness" and "withdrawal" which would end in the "unofficial democracy" of the "armed revolt" if they were not dealt with, and that the only way to deal with them was to deprive newspapers, television, cinema, and radio of the "dominative character" that was enabling the "insincerity

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of a minority" bent on protecting its own culture and power to persuade the masses to "act, think and know as it wished them to."

About equality *Culture and Society* was vague. "A common culture" was not "at any level an equal culture," there was no need for equality in "personal property" or for equality of "knowledge, skill and effort," since "a physicist would be glad to learn from a better physicist" and "a good physicist" would not think himself "a better man than a good composer . . . chess player . . . carpenter or runner." Equality was, nevertheless, crucial, and societies from which it was missing were said not only to "depersonalize . . . and degrade" but also—as though Japan had never existed—to raise "structures of cruelty and exploitation" that "crippled human energy."

Williams was a class warrior as surely as Orwell had been. He had Orwell's sense of complexity, and also Orwell's mistrust of panaceas. In the discouraging circumstances of 1958, his virtuous but self-defeating conclusions were that freedom was "unplannable," that the "human crisis" was always a "crisis of understanding," and that culture was a "natural growth" which could only be achieved by comprehending the "long revolution" that had been going on since the eighteenth century "at a level of meaning which it was not easy to reach."

Culture and Society supplied an historical and theoretical basis from which *The Long Revolution* vacuously, *Communications* (1962) piously, and the May Day Manifesto of 1967 politically, deduced policy conclusions about the ways in which public ownership and control could make the media minister to a common culture. These did not, however, expand the structure that *Culture and Society* had established. It was only in *Modern Tragedy* that expansion was effected.

Like *Culture and Society*, *Modern Tragedy* discussed texts—the main tragic texts and texts about tragic theory that had been written in Europe and the United States since Ibsen—and extracted from them a political message about the inadequacy of individuation and about the desirability of revolution.

Modern Tragedy was written in a dense, coded prose. Decoded, it manifests the confusion between the cultural elite and the people which was a feature of Williams's doctrine throughout his work and which became particularly troublesome in this book, where dramatic and fictional tragedy were presented as realizations of the "shape and set" of modern "culture," and the dramatists and novelists who had produced it were assumed to represent "our" minds and experience.

This thesis was both elitist and anti-elitist, naïve about the prospect of bridging the gap between the cultural elite and the people, but emphasizing the affiliations that kept Williams, as a member of the former, in conscious empathy with the latter. The effect was nevertheless odd, implying that Strindberg, Brecht, and Arthur Miller, for example, were not arcane, and amalgamating the "we" who went to their plays or listened to Williams's lectures in Cambridge with the "we" who had been described appreciatively in *Border Country*. However deep Williams's desire was to make "critical discrimination" relevant to the people among whom he had grown up, moreover, it neglected the consideration that critical discrimination was in fact a minority activity which spoke meaningfully only to those who had already heard Leavis's voice.

In *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952) Williams had criticized the English theater as a manifestation of literary decline and for failing to achieve either "the communication" of an "experience" and a "radical reading of life," or that "total performance" which reflected "changes in the structure of feeling as a whole." In *Modern Tragedy* the central contentions were that "liberal" tragedy, while being liberal because it emphasized the "surpassing individual," and tragic because it recorded his defeat by society or the universe, reflected the inability of the money-oriented privacy of the bourgeois ethic to provide a "positive" conception of society. It was the "individual

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fight against the lie" embodied in "false relationships, a false society and a false conception of man" that Ibsen had made central, but it was the liberal martyrs' discovery of the lie in themselves and their failure to relate themselves to a "social" consciousness that heralded the "breakdown of liberalism" and the need to replace its belief in the primacy of "individualist" desire and aspiration by a socialist perception of the primacy of "common" desire and aspiration.

Williams wished to give tragic theory a social function. He pointed out that "significant suffering" was not confined to persons of "rank," and that personal belief, faults in the soul, "God," "death," and the "individual will," which had been central to the tragic experience of the past, were not central to the tragic experience of the present. It was the "human agency" and "ethical control" manifested in revolution and the "deep social crisis through which we had all been living" that were the proper subjects of "modern" tragedy, and it was human agency and ethical control that tragic theory needed to accommodate.

The first point that had to be explained was the Burkean point that revolution caused suffering. The second point was the anti-Burkean point that revolution was not the only cause of suffering, that suffering was "in the whole action" of which "revolution" was only "the crisis," and that it was suffering as an aspect of the "wholeness" of the action that needed to be considered. And this, of course, disclosed the real agenda in *Modern Tragedy*—the use of tragic texts to formulate a socialist theory of tragedy in which revolution would receive a literary justification and society would become more important than the individual.

In all this Williams was moving out from the defensiveness of *Culture and Society* and making a central feature of the argument that, when the revolutionary process was complete, "revolution" would become "epic," suffering would be "justified," and pre-revolutionary institutions, so far from being the "settled . . . innocent order" that they had claimed to be, would be seen to have been rooted in "violence and disorder." This was the route by which tragedy and tragic theory could remove cynicism and despair, could give revolution the "tragic" perspective that Marx had given it, and could show what tragedy had hitherto failed to show, that "degeneration, brutalization, fear, hatred and envy" were endemic in existing society's "tragic" failure to "incorporate . . . all its people as whole human beings." It was also the route by which tragedy and tragic theory could incorporate the fact that further "degeneration, brutalization, fear, hatred and envy" would be integral to the "whole action"—not just to the "crisis" and the revolutionary energy released by it or the "new kinds of alienation" which the revolution against alienation would have to "overcome . . . if it was to remain revolutionary," but also, and supremely, to the connection between "terror" and "liberation."

Williams's rhetoric was ruthless, and yet in retrospect looks faintly silly. Nor were the tasks that he attributed to tragic theory plausible. It remains true, nevertheless, that *Modern Tragedy*, while reiterating the formal denial that revolution was to be identified with the violent capture of power and identifying it rather as a "change . . . in the deepest structure of relationships and feelings," implied, more than any other of Williams's works, a circuitous but indubitably evil attempt to encourage the young to think of violence as morally reputable.[7]

In evaluating Williams, one wishes to be just. He should not be dismissed merely because his followers have helped to keep their party out of office, since many of them, and perhaps he also, regarded party politics as merely a convenient way of inserting their moral messages into the public mind. Like the theorists of the student revolution of the Sixties, Williams was "against liberalism," but those who are against liberalism for conservative reasons do not need his sort of

7 Williams's Afterword to *Modern Tragedy* is reprinted in *The Politics of Modernism*, page 95.

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support. They should not be misled by the "organicism" of *Culture and Society,* which ignored the moral solidarity of twentieth-century English society and used the language of solidarity in order to subvert such solidarity as monarchy and two world wars had created by denying that it existed.

In later life Williams made something of the malice he claimed to have encountered on his final return to Cambridge in 1961 from what he thought of as its middle-class establishment, and contrasted its brassiness and careerism with the cultural superiority of the community in which he had grown up. The review of *The Long Revolution* that appeared in *The Cambridge Review* in May 1961,[8] and which Williams found it convenient to attribute to such an establishment, was written in fact by a conservative dissident who believed no less than Williams in the desirability of moral solidarity, but thought it vulgar and hypocritical to pretend that Williams's working-class background and experience of adult education around the Sussex Downs exempted him from the elitist character inseparable from occupancy of a tenured appointment in a serious university. Indeed, the animus behind the review, which Professor Alan O'Connor describes as "icy," was the belief that those who benefit from such appointments have a duty to expose humbug rather than to disseminate it, and that the quality in Williams's thinking which a recent reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Chris Baldick, in the November 3-9, 1989 issue) described as its "extending humanistic impulse," was more properly described as an "innocence about the scope of political activity, ignorance of the diversity of contemporary society, and capacity for ignoring the quality of life of those of whose condition . . . Williams . . . had no experience which ought . . . to have disabled a prophet of that 'better human order' which he sought to bring before us."

The writer of the review did not know then that there was to be a student revolution, or that Williams was to be one of its sages. But he was right to believe—and he repeats now—that Williams's condemnation of existing society was a trick, that it raised expectations for the future by ignoring the expectations that were fulfillable already, and claimed academic or tragic authority for its condemnation of existing capitalist society while being uncritical about the prospect of an imagined post-capitalist society in the future. Who but the theorist of a "children's crusade" would justify the infliction of pain and suffering on the off chance that the pain and suffering entailed in existing hegemonies might be replaced by a hegemony from which pain and suffering had been eliminated? And is it not good to know that from one "mighty voice" at least there will in the future be no *fresh* misrepresentations of the nature of power, and the duties and responsibilities of power and position?

Williams is best understood as the politicizer of Leavis, the man who, while he criticized Leavis, brought him out of the closet and converted "critical discrimination" into a set of Marxist slogans. Williams lacked Leavis's power and his pretense that critical discrimination was not political. He also lacked Eagleton's fluency and intelligence, and the intellectual brutality that has saved Eagleton from being merely the playboy of the movement of the 1960s.

Mr. Neil Kinnock is already imposing on the socialism of the English Labour Party a moralistic liberalism to which Williams's mistiness is so eminently conformable that his influence may well survive the 1960s. Nevertheless, it is Williams, among others, whom Mr. Kinnock is emasculating. It is the violent and revolutionary nature of the doctrine that Williams shared with these others in those years which is being abandoned, and it is for this reason that this article has highlighted the content of the doctrine that he preached then to a generation for whom it was "bliss to be alive" at that odious moment.

8 "Mr. Raymond Williams," by Maurice Cowling; *The Cambridge Review*, May 27, 1961; pages 546-551.

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Primary painting: Sonia Delaunay

by Deborah Rosenthal

Death is what artists fixate on—it's the threshold of posterity. The painter who hits his or her stride only around thirty, as have many modern artists, needs a longish life to accomplish the work. But if an artist dies at an advanced age, some of the clarifying process that death applies to the shape of the career may already have begun. It's possible to outlive one's mature style and pass into a "late" style; or to outlive the generation with whom one made one's mark; or to outlive the revolutionary impact of one's work; or simply to outlive one's fame or popularity. The biographer who wants to make sense of a long artistic life may have to trace more than one decline, as well as the rise of more than one reputation.

Sonia Delaunay's long life, the subject of Axel Madsen's new biography, was a curiously doubled one.[1] Her artistic career can't be seen as a simple trajectory through painting from youth to old age (she died in 1979 at age ninety-four). Almost from its beginning, Delaunay's artistic activity was divided (often very unevenly) between design—books, fabrics, clothing, home furnishings, stained glass, even cars were among the surfaces to which she applied her art—and plain old painting, whether in gouache on paper or oil on canvas. The design career brought her money and fame in her thirties; it first supported but later displaced her work in painting, when success obliged her to spend all her time on business. Ultimately, design interwove itself with painting. In her last several decades, the artist did design work as many artists have, as an adjunct or extension of her primary work of simply painting.

Sonia Delaunay was born Sarah Stern in 1885 into the poor branch of a Jewish family in the Ukraine. The child was adopted at age five by her rich St. Petersburg uncle and aunt Terk, and took their name; she never visited her parents again. Without the Terks' intervention she could never have become what she became; but the world of the assimilated Russian-Jewish bourgeoisie under the Tsar which she entered through her rich relations was somewhat stultifying. Their social life, as described in Madsen's biography, has a bit the flavor of the Guggenheims'—sans eccentricity and madness—and the future for which she was intended was nothing more than a good marriage. The occasional artistic meteor in this dulled, even Victorian, universe (the presence of Diaghilev in Petersburg in 1903, for instance) is not enough to explain how, from the age of fourteen or so, Sonia (as her name was Russianized) became involved in drawing and painting. By 1903 she'd persuaded her adoptive parents to let her study art in Karlsruhe, Germany, and, two years later, to settle in Paris. Even without much of a visual culture (though she'd seen some of the great works of art in Western Europe

1 *Sonia Delaunay: Artist of the Lost Generation*, by Axel Madsen; McGraw-Hill, 357 pages, $24.95.

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while travelling with her family), this lonely, artistic adolescent had been able to envision a Paris of the mind.

The real city Sonia reached in 1905 had a cluster of art schools on the rue de la Grande Chaumière, and the young girl was soon enfolded into the small and rather tightly knit art world of Paris as a student at the Académie de la Palette. By 1908 she was desperate to stay. She'd already made the acquaintance of Wilhelm Uhde, the Parisian art dealer and early advocate of Cubism. At a virginal twenty-three, she arranged for herself a *mariage de convenance* with Uhde—whose male lover lived with the couple—in order to come into her inheritance. The allowance sent monthly by her uncle was a rather enormous flow of money, and gave her considerable latitude until it was permanently cut off by the Russian Revolution's appropriation of private property in 1917. By that time she had already met and fallen in love with the French painter Robert Delaunay, become pregnant with their son Charles, and married Delaunay in 1910 after her—again arranged—divorce from Uhde. During the mid-Teens, Sonia signed her work either Delaunay-Terk or Delaunay. Though in 1938 Robert wrote about her using the hyphenated name, at some point Sonia herself had dropped the Terk and called herself simply Delaunay.

With her marriage to Robert, Delaunay joined an inner circle of Parisian avant-gardists who played younger generation to Picasso and Braque (though the Delaunays, born several months apart, were only a few years younger). Their intimates in the pre-World War I years came to include the poets Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars. If in the histories and the museums the Delaunays have received unequal attention (Robert is considered the Delaunay of record, so to speak), some of this may have to do with what their union was like—the marriage of a sibyl and a jabberer. History often admits the voluble one first; but on balance the two appear to have been true companions, as well matched as the artists Larionov and Goncharova, or the Delaunays' friends Arp and Taeuber-Arp. Not only because of their artistic comradeliness, but also because of Sonia's Russian-Jewish origins and Robert's weakness for theoretical jabberwocky (which alienated him from the older generation of Cubists), they were in some sense outsider-insiders in Cubist Paris. (Gertrude Stein makes a couple of icy references to them in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.)

But pre-World War I Parisian art was in a sense a sum of outsiders' contributions. The Delaunays' genius brought non-objective painting based on color itself into the story that was just then being writ large—world-shatteringly large—in the grays and browns of Braque's and Picasso's Analytic Cubism. By the time World War I broke out—stranding the Delaunays first in Spain and then in Portugal, where they ended up staying for the duration—both Sonia and Robert had already made major statements in the art composed of flat color shapes of disks and rectangles that they devised together and called Simultaneism. In 1911-12, Robert painted his *Windows*: softly colored grids that bind painter and viewer together in a Bergsonian moment of dual consciousness, simultaneously inside and out on the street. Between 1911 and 1913, Sonia pieced together her famous multi-colored baby blanket and her abstract binding for Blaise Cendrars' poem "Les Pâques à New York." Together, the two artists made a quantum leap out of the Cubist studio interior into a world unbounded by the particular contours of objects. It was a leap that no other Parisian had yet made.

And yet today, ten years after her death in Paris, Sonia Delaunay's reputation is one of the most seriously undervalued of the twentieth century. The scarcity of her paintings in museum collections—only one work regularly hangs in New York, for instance, and it's an early painting—has contributed more than any other single factor to this obscurity. Within the past decade, some attention has been paid to her

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work: Arthur A. Cohen's wonderful monograph on Delaunay, originally published by Abrams in 1975 while the artist was still alive and working, was reprinted (though unrevised) in 1988; in 1980, the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo mounted a retrospective exhibition of her work which was then crowded, unsatisfyingly, into the Grey Art Gallery's cramped spaces in New York later that year; and finally, in 1985, a large centenary exhibition of both Delaunays' work at the Pompidou Center in Paris yielded a copiously illustrated exhibition catalogue. Since then, a steady trickle of small gallery shows in New York has encouraged those painters and students who search out her work: we run to see, and tell each other about, these collections of small scraps, with the occasional more important work included among them.

Delaunay's retreat from the public eye is partly to blame for the state of her reputation (she held an exhibition of her work in Stockholm in 1916, and then didn't show solo in Paris again until 1953); and clearly it was in part a self-imposed retreat. The cutting off of her Russian income in 1917 meant that somebody in the family had to make a living. Robert was too self-involved or too impractical: Sonia spent most of the Twenties as a commercial designer. (Later she said she saw her design "researches" as a practical extension of Simultaneism.) After Robert's death in 1941, she spent years tending his reputation. All of this took her away from painting and away from showing.

Now, with her oeuvre completed, the easel paintings of her last two decades may be joined to the earlier works, and an appraisal of the whole can begin to emerge. The appearance of a biography in English seems a good sign. But Axel Madsen—whose other subjects have ranged from André Malraux to Yves Saint Laurent—has not attempted a portrait of the immortal Delaunay, the artist. Clearly he began his book with admiration for Delaunay, and, admirably, he ends still feeling affection for her. But Madsen—who's read Delaunay's (unpublished) journals, and talked to her son and some of her friends—novelizes her life. We're inside Delaunay's head as often as he can put us there, and when we're not, we're not far away, looking through the eyes of her son. Madsen's reporting of fifty-year-old conversations and seventy-year-old interior monologues is hard to trust (based as it must be at least in part on translation from the French) when mistakes like "marquis" for "maquis," "Lapin à Gil" for "Lapin Agile," and huge numbers of other errors in both French and English appear throughout the text. This goes beyond an editor's lack of vigilance in proofreading. Certain passages that sounded familiar as I read turned out to be lifted almost wholesale from the text of the Albright-Knox exhibition catalogue. Of Delaunay's art, Madsen has little of his own to say and absolutely nothing of any substance. When I reached one of the very few phrases he actually does concoct about Delaunay's work—"color was the fabric of the world"—I thought, well, Arthur A. Cohen's "color is the skin of the world" *still* hasn't been improved upon. Perhaps the journals will be published, and Delaunay's autobiographical work, *Nous irons jusqu'au soleil,* (1978) will appear in English. We must still wait for a critical study to take up where Cohen's book left off.

Whatever the financial and emotional pressures that led Delaunay to assume the role of commercial artist and sole support of her household, the effects of this career on her painting are of some interest. It seems that Robert was unsuited, not just through lack of desire or interest but also through lack of talent, to design. (His large-scale decorations for the Universal Exposition of 1937 seem to me rather static.) For Delaunay, though, the interplay of design and the problems of pure painting was a vital phase of her self-education as an artist. Delaunay's terrific industry in creating Simultaneous This and Simultaneous That seems at times to have produced Simultaneism that comes by the yard. But her design activity fostered some of what Delaunay brought to the joint development of pure

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abstraction to which both she and Robert then adhered (Robert sometimes in theory more than in practice) for the rest of their lives. Sonia Delaunay had never embraced Cubism, but leapt directly into the flat color shapes of the bookbindings, the baby blanket, and from there in turn into the famous 1913 six-and-one-half-foot-long vertical Simultaneous painting which "translated" Cendrars' poem "La Prose du Transsibérien" into a word-picture-scroll that was unprecedented in modern Western art. Delaunay herself spoke of her baby blanket as inspired by Russian peasant work, and in her vision there is something exotic—or at least extra-Parisian—that she shares with artists like Kandinsky, Mondrian, Klee, Arp, and Taeuber-Arp. But for Delaunay there was Matisse, too, perhaps before anything else—the Matisse whose 1905 Fauve portrait of his wife had come to the public eye just as Delaunay arrived in Paris. In her reported comment that, to her and her student friends (freshly endowed with Expressionist notions imported from Germany), Matisse seemed "bourgeois," we may be hearing the Expressionist's suspicion of the structural painter. But there is also the hint of a complete acceptance of the Fauve excess, borne out by the Matisse-inspired portraits she painted during the next couple of years. What she was making her own was the primacy of color.

From there Delaunay moved rapidly. Encouraged by Robert, she began at some point to forego preparatory drawing in favor of drawing with color directly onto the canvas. I don't believe that she ever had any other technical problems, that is, problems of realization, after the hurdle of drawing directly on canvas was passed. She seems to have had the gift of being able to take in what she needed, apply it without hesitation, and arrive decisively at her destinations. By 1912, she had abandoned modeling for flat painting. By 1913 she'd assimilated Robert's great idea of the elongated-format canvas in her own long horizontal painting *Le Bal Bullier*, where also the shreds of color have taken on the curvature of Robert's famous disks painted the year before.

The rapidity of these adaptations testifies to Delaunay's ability to know her own vision. It was in no way architectonic. While Robert used such emblems of modernity as the Eiffel Tower in his paintings, Delaunay found her metaphor in the swirling figures of the Bal Bullier (a Paris dance hall). The moving curve—the arabesque of Matisse divorced from description of the object—linked Delaunay with Robert's effort to liberate an infinite space within the easel picture. This is beautifully stated in his one clear theoretical article, "La Lumière": "We see as far as the stars." But the many moving bodies which Delaunay clothed in her years as a designer also took her far from the confines of the four sides of the rectangle, as well as from the traditional Western impulse to construct an illusion of depth. The evolution of Delaunay's later easel paintings out of ideas that were posed by the decorative arts suggests a number of ways in which abstract artists can use the past. It may be impossible to be an abstract artist without having seen Cubism, but it may also be impossible to be a certain kind of abstract artist without having studied the great decorative achievements of the past—wall painting, textiles, stained glass.

Delaunay's easel painting took as its essential donnée the representation of a fictional world that, though framed by the four sides of the canvas, never recedes from them (or from the viewer). Throughout the several decades of her art, she laid down rectangles and circles of flat color, bisected them, elongated the canvas to repeat a given configuration, and spiraled half-circles and circles within circles and rectangles. When we go through Delaunay's elongated rectangular canvases, from *Le Bal Bullier* to *Voyages Lointains* (a mural of 1937), to the 1953 *Rhythme Coloré No. 175*, to *Rhythme Syncopé dit "Serpent Noir"* of 1967, we experience a transformation of the terms of easel painting. The "once upon a time" which the easel picture's boundaries suggest has been replaced by "now this place and

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time" and (simultaneously, woven into the same fabric, as it were) "*that* place and *that* time" as well. A red square or a blue curve is this place (time), then that place (time) further on; and each is as close to us as any other.

This Proustian frieze makes for an art of locations, not objects; of palpable and flat color, not atmosphere. Mondrian stated, in his 1930 theory of abstraction entitled "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art," that the "neutralization" or democratization of forms in the plastic arts called for the suppression of the object, of specific and delimiting representation. But at the same time he gave a crucial place to facture—to the way the painting is painted. "The work of art," he wrote, "must be 'produced,' 'constructed' . . . . the opposition of its constructive elements and its execution arouse emotion." Delaunay, who began by scissoring abstract forms out of colored fabric, knew all about constructing the elements. She painted, increasingly, with a sureness and seamlessness of stroke. Though her brushwork is rather plain, it realizes so much that it feels virtuosic. Bravura brushwork usually works its effects by drawing attention to itself, to the fluctuations of attack through which we recognize the variations in light reflected off surfaces as different as velvet and glass. Delaunay's stroke (which she'd perfected by applying it to just such disparate surfaces) is everywhere the same in a given painting, and everywhere made to seem identical to the shape of a color. Since her brushstroke resolves into nothing but a color, nothing is analogized by this virtuosity but what the arrangement of colors on the canvas can make us feel.

The geometric shapes that Delaunay draws, summarily but not precisely, evoke no associations to the Platonic solids. In this world of only surface, where no shape bleeds away its color as we move from its center to its edge, the occasional casually left interstices of white canvas at the edges of color intervals hint at the presence of an easel-picture illusion. These quickly painted pictures are almost uniformly opaque, breathless but hardly airless. In 1970 Delaunay commented that "besides the primaries, I find I need very few colors." She might have added, too, that she needed nothing much but a change in hue or in the direction of a curve; or the sensation of syncopation that is created when two contours whose alignment would close a full circle (whose two colors would complete each other) fail quite to do so. Delaunay's primaries aren't building blocks, or great principles of things (as Mondrian's are), but simply ***naked*** surfaces, stripped of all but relative shape, position, and scale. Even her green feels primary.

There's nothing but direct sensation in Delaunay's paintings: her metaphors have no literary content. She is the only artist I can think of who can actually make texture indicate a change in location, or in emotional temperature. Into the midst of the charged, full-out hues of her postwar easel paintings she will sometimes drop a square or rectangle of crisscrossed gray strokes. When I'd first seen this in her paintings at the Grey Art Gallery show, I was shocked by what seemed a weakening of her brushstroke, an almost sentimental gesture. But in looking at a brilliant design for stained glass she'd done in 1967, where she uses the same effect, I realized that it originated in grisaille, or black-and-white stained glass. I wish I could see those easel paintings again—since then I've seen only a single small one like them. It seems to me now that in fact Delaunay's aim is not to show us grisaille and let us see through the illusion at the same time (as Klee might do), but instead to present the effect of light alone, now clouded, now at full strength. And when a row of her colored triangles changes color as they slide diagonally across a canvas (for Delaunay rarely lets us stand squarely on earth, looking head-on at the horizon line, but almost always tilts us into motion), the effect is very much like the change in the color of illuminated letters in a medieval manuscript, as their mutations move us through a word. Yet there is neither

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latticework nor geometry nor figures to refer us to text or to any other layer of meaning in Delaunay's paintings. There's only the pure movement of colored form that, if we follow it, spells out completeness. These syncopations, these shifts, these reversals, cannot be translated: they are as elemental as if they were breaks in the flesh, or dropped beats of the heart.

I don't know how many paintings Delaunay actually finished in the postwar decades; in 1975 Arthur A. Cohen said that they numbered in the hundreds. A major retrospective of this work has yet to come, and until it does we may not be able really to see her painting achievement standing on its own. My most profound experience of her painting has come through visiting the Albright-Knox Gallery regularly over the past several years, where a great Delaunay of 1958 hangs opposite a Robert Delaunay, near an early Kandinsky, and down the hall from abstractions by Taeuber-Arp, Hélion, Herbin, Torres-García, Arp, Klee, and Mondrian. Like so many of the modernist pioneers, Delaunay outlived the initial assault on their optimism inflicted by the beginnings of the ominous Thirties and the shattering years of World War II to begin, again, the plain act of painting. Her *Rhythme Coloré* in Buffalo is dashed off, as it seems, just a minute ago, in red, blue, yellow, green, black, and white. Taeuber-Arp's ghostly colored circles and semi-circles on a black ground; Mondrian's rectangular white expanses cut by black lines; Herbin's blaring colors arranged as symmetry-in-dissymetry—all echo and answer similar elements in Delaunay's composition. Who is Delaunay? One painting, flat as a playing card and as irreducible as any great image is.

There are many who think that Sonia Delaunay had only half, and the thinner half at that, of a career named "Delaunay." Even Arthur A. Cohen, who addresses Delaunay as the "greatest living woman artist" in a 1970 interview, doesn't discuss her painting much in relation to her peers. At the beginning of the conversation, he elicits from her a flat refusal to talk color theory: "No, I have nothing to do with Chevreul; only Robert did." It's not clear to me that Delaunay considered Robert the theorist of her art as well as of his own, since the development and realization of her work proceeded so differently from his. The question, "Did Sonia Delaunay think Robert's work more important than her own?" occurs, inevitably, to anyone looking through her old exhibition catalogues who finds her design for an "hommage à Delaunay" announcement where "Delaunay" is only Robert. But this is the wrong question to ask. Painters are rarely able, or for that matter called upon, to assess themselves in direct relation to their closest contemporaries. How much less could a wife and husband do so; especially this "group of two" who so clearly saw the sum of both their lives as steps taken together into the history of art. *Sonia Delaunay: Artist of the Lost Generation* is a disappointment for those who care about the paintings. We're still waiting for the books and exhibitions that might let us see a great Sonia Delaunay plain. But in the meantime there are some great paintings that will have to do.

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Tone and language in the historical novel

by Marguerite Yourcenar

It has not been sufficiently emphasized that although we possess an enormous mass of written documents, and also visual documents, from the past, nothing is left to us of *voices* before the first nasal-sounding phonograph records of the nineteenth century. What is more, as far as the representation of speech is concerned, nothing, or virtually nothing, was achieved before certain great novelists or dramatists of the nineteenth century. By that, I mean that they were the first to register *conversation* in all its spontaneity, its disjointed logic, its complex byways, its lacunae, and its unarticulated implications without passing through tragic or comic stylization or lyric outburst.

Neither antiquity nor any of the intervening centuries offers us the equivalent of a conversation between Pierre Bezukhov and Prince Andrei in Tolstoy, between Ibsen's Rosmer and Rebecca West and her wily brother-in-law, or—at opposite ends of the spectrum—Vautrin's words as he propounds his views on life to Lucien and the brief interchange between Marcel and the doctor who comes to listen to his grandmother's heartbeat. The transcription of speech in terms of pure realism, without any sort of bias, is curiously contemporaneous with those two mechanical means of reproducing the object as it is, the phonograph and the photograph.

Mutatis mutandis, the same observations can be made about the unspoken words which take shape within us under the sudden impact of an experience—Rastignac's impressions as he looks out over Paris from the heights of Père-Lachaise, the last thoughts that cross Anna Karenina's mind, the feelings of Prince Andrei as he lies wounded on the battlefield of Austerlitz. It follows that, for every novelistic attempt at re-creation, the representation of these various *unstylized* forms of speech constitutes an enormous stumbling block. One may indeed wonder if the methods used to achieve this in the novel as it developed in Europe in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries aren't really meaningless when applied to an earlier period. One may especially wonder if the fact that the ancients themselves have left nothing of this sort doesn't prove that the form of the novel is badly adapted to evoking ancient sensibility.

Let us look again at those literary texts out of which emerge, so to speak, the sounds and spoken rhythms of that period which extends roughly from Pericles to Julian the Apostate, a period of about eight centuries. The philosophical dialogue was a Greek genre *par excellence*, subsequently a Latin one by imitation: in it literary conventions are,

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naturally, combined with dialectic conventions. It is only here and there, in brief passages (mostly in prologues or epilogues) meant to give the reader a rest, that Plato, with an admirable artistry (and I underscore the word *artistry*), slips in some short exchanges which might be those of contemporary conversation. The great tragedians, by definition, use a tragic style, itself often derived from the archaic terms and turns of phrase of epic language. The dialogues of comedy are often confined either to the language of humble people (one could write an entire essay on the amused condescension of comic authors in every era who reproduce, each in his own way, popular speech) or, more rarely, to the parody of polished language, such as the public believes is spoken. The utterances of Socrates in *The Clouds* are like the arguments of Bergson or Gabriel Marcel translated into popular jokes. Menander and Terence give their characters a language of bourgeois correctness, somewhat colorless, which was later imitated everywhere by the "high comedy" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—a language which has never been spoken outside of the theater. The mimes offer us observations of an exquisite realistic precision, but once again based on ironic condescension: Herondas and Theocritus look down on their pandars and gossips from a great height. The picaresque novel, of which we have only two examples, Petronius and Apuleius, sometimes has the limitations of mime, sometimes those of the "good joke" or popular tale.

Certain elegiac or lyric poems tell us something about the tone of voice in which emotions were spoken, cried out, or sung. We feel that cry of passion in Theocritus's *Sorceress* must have been uttered more or less in that way. Without doubt, even excessively literary works like Ovid's *Art of Love* supply us with something of the tone of flirtatious conversations—all the more so as that sort of conversation is based on conventions. Here and there the Greek epigrammatists open clear vistas: six verses of Callimachus sum up what an intellectual faced with suicide must have thought and therefore said; the foreign slave asking to be buried according to his native rites, in an epigram of Dioscorides, must have spoken almost like that. Yet once again we find that *decantation* which is the characteristic, in itself admirable, of ancient literature: the poet serves as a sort of filter. Satirists exaggerate by profession. Some of Martial's epigrams give us the tone of Roman gossip; the broadside of insults directed against Caesar by Catullus must have been mouthed by many of Pompey's partisans; yet these versified obscenities are still literature.

The historians also simplify and schematize, distancing themselves, if not from the deeds (and who has better described the deeds than Thucydides?), at least from the hubbub of words surrounding those deeds. We know that they undertook to rewrite the debates they inserted into their work in order to make them express what the orator might have or ought to have said. Even less do we hear the tumult of an assembly in their works; yet stenographic transcripts existed; but it would have been contrary to their concept of history to have reproduced them as they were. Their purpose is, in effect, exemplary, as it is with Plutarch or (in another sense and *a contrario*) with Tacitus; or else analytic, as it is with Thucydides and Polybius. It is rarely, if ever, the reality of an incident seized at the moment, and even less the reality of verbal exchange and voice. Suetonius gives us the written equivalent of those realistic Roman portrait busts of private citizens and statesmen; but from that series of traits of character or of manners scarcely a spoken word emerges, and never so much as a fragment of conversation. To be sure, from time to time a "historic utterance," whether authentic or not (and I would maintain that at this distance authenticity is of little importance), causes us to hear a voice almost always raised to the diapason of a cry, or else some decisive words which sum up a situation and are engraved, as it were, for the posterity of all time ("Tu quoque, Brute . . . ," "Qualis

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artifex pereo . . . ," "Alea jacta est . . ."). We hear them, so to speak, in a void, isolated from whatever words or cries preceded or followed them—the angry interjections of the conspirators as they fall on Julius Ceasar, the terrified murmur of the poor women and faithful slaves around Nero, the excited conversations of the officers and men as they crossed the Rubicon with their leader. In the exceedingly mediocre *Life of Commodus* in the *Historia Augusta*, the decree condemning Commodus to the Scalae Gemoniae stuns us, because it makes us feel palpably the enormous surge of hatred that swept over the senators as they looked on the dead emperor. It is one of the rare cases where the rumbling of a mob can be heard across the centuries.

Happily, there are sub-literary documents (the one I've just cited is one of them) which haven't undergone the filtering or rearranging literature entails. Legal judgments or decrees, such as the senatorial warrants or decisions punishing with death participation in the Bacchanalia, which cause us brutally to experience the terror of the people inculpated; letters of private citizens which furnish us with the tone of a student apologizing for having wrecked the family chariot or of a soldier asking his family to send him a care package; the letters of Cicero and Pliny, more consciously belonging to the "epistolary genre," which tell us something about written communications in upper-class society; graffiti which contain the scrawled echo of the talk and shouts of the street. They are voices out of the past, some of them practically in their raw state, each of them giving us the faint shock of the unexpected; yet there is nothing in them that would have enabled me to re-create with even a minimum of plausibility an exchange about serious or urgent, subtle or complex matters, a conversation between Hadrian and Trajan, or Plotina, or Antinous, or with his legate Severus concerning the affairs of Judaea. Nothing, or virtually nothing, is left us of those inflections, those quarter-tones, those articulated half-smiles which yet can change everything.

I shall inflict only one example upon the reader: I caused Hadrian to report, in scarcely amplified form, an incident which is recounted in a few words in a chronicle: the emperor, ill, had asked a doctor for some poison, and the doctor killed himself in order not to have to refuse the request. At the outset, the novelist adds to this skeletal news item a few details she hopes are plausible: the emperor's sympathy for the young doctor ("I took pleasure in his intelligence, both daring and dreamy, and in the dark fire of those deep-set eyes"); the subterfuges used to persuade the chief doctor, Hermogenes, from whom the emperor could not hope for this ultimate help, to go spend the day in Rome, thus leaving the sick man in the care of his young assistant ("An excuse came for me to get rid of Hermogenes for several hours; he had to examine candidates for the chair of medicine which I had just founded at the Odeon"); the interview which, on Hadrian's part, ends in supplications ("I insisted; I made absolute demand; I employed every means to try to draw his pity, or to corrupt him; he will be the last man whom I shall have implored"); the equivocal response of the doctor ("Finally won over, he promised me to go and seek the dose of poison. I awaited him in vain until evening. Late in the night I learned with horror that he had just been found dead in his laboratory, with a glass phial in his hands"). I believe the tone of this passage to be more or less correct. But suppose I had tried to present these actions and conversations directly? I know that I would have fallen into error, into melodrama or pastiche, or both. In this regard, popular literature alternates between the servile copying of a few ancient expressions known to everyone ("Fill it up! Fill it up!" says the drunken patrician in the old French operetta . . . "Bear these wingèd words to Metella") and the homespun ingenuity of technicolor scenarios ("Spartacus, I think I am going to have a baby"). Someone will say that Corneille in *Cinna*, Racine in *Britannicus*, and Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* managed it all rather well. But that is, of course, because

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they possessed genius. It is also—and perhaps even more to the point—because they were not concerned with *tonal authenticity*.

Without having compiled the preceding catalogue, I chose to make Hadrian use a dignified form of speech (*oratio togata*). Different though they are from each other, and whether they are called *Commentaries*, *Meditations*, *Epistles*, *Treatises*, or *Discourses*, the greatest works of the Greek and Latin prose writers who come before or immediately after Hadrian all belong more or less within this category of sustained style, half narrative, half meditative, but always essentially *written*, from which immediate impressions and sensations are virtually excluded and from which any verbal exchange is *ipso facto* banished. Obviously it was not a question here of imitating Caesar or Seneca, or even Marcus Aurelius, but of deriving from them a pattern, a rhythm, the equivalent of a piece of fabric which one subsequently drapes as one will over the nude model. The "style of the toga" would provide the emperor with that dignity without which we cannot imagine antiquity—wrongly, no doubt, yet also with some reason, for dignity was one of man's ideals down to the end of antiquity: as he lay dying, Caesar arranged the fold of his toga. This style allowed me to eliminate those *minima* which are proverbially eschewed by the praetor. The sounds of spoken exchanges fell away by themselves: there was no more question of Hadrian's recounting his conversation with Osroes than of Caesar's having thought to put in writing his discussion with Vercingetorix. Even better, the *oratio togata* allowed me to present Hadrian addressing—beyond his contemporaries and his adopted grandson—an ideal interlocutor, *Man himself*, who has been the enticing chimera for all civilizations down to our time. He thereby addresses us.

But to speak of an address is also to speak of monologue; and it was at that level that I finally found the voice. Possibly that observation has more significance for Hadrian than for us, since in that epoch a man reading alone, and no doubt *writing* alone, read or wrote *aloud*. In attempting to rediscover that voice through the deliberate form of an address, I used the little—but the diverse little—that is left from Hadrian himself. We possess no more than three lines of the *Memoirs* he dictated to or had composed by an amanuensis and which no doubt constituted only a very official résumé of his life. Nevertheless, the man who admits therein to having got drunk as a youth at Trajan's table in order to curry favor with him was surely not a man who shrouded everything in lies; the strategist who, in an address to his troops, described with a refined precision their movements on a day of maneuvers reveals the intellectual beneath the general-in-chief. I tried to synthesize a series of strict legal or administrative decrees emanating from the head of state with the casual, light verses of the great amateur who, although he preferred the most difficult poets, seemed himself willingly to have turned to the popular poetry of his day when he wrote his own verse. I had to make the best use I could of three intimate letters which are perhaps authentic and which, even if they aren't, at least show how at that time people thought Hadrian expressed himself. One, gay and playful, to his mother-in-law; another, detached, to a brother-in-law who was also his secret enemy; the third, very dignified, to his successor. A few writings by contemporaries who were part of his circle also seem, at moments, to refract his voice. Arrian (if it is indeed he), addressing Hadrian in his *Periplus of the Black Sea*, gives an example of the tender allusions his familiars made to the emperor on the subject of the dead and deified Antinous. The folklore gathered more or less from everywhere by Phlegon, his secretary, shows us the topics, if not the tone, of the casual conversations at table and at the end of a day's journey. The list of administrative divisions of Antinoopolis, charged with religious and mystical significance, carries us back to the orders given in his own voice by Hadrian for the founding of that city.

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But perhaps those rare *spoken words* embedded in the heavy dough of the chronicles helped me even more: the retorts, some of a military brusqueness, others of an Italian finesse; the curt, lofty remark of the husband admitting that he would have got divorced "had he been a private citizen"; the bitter reflections of the aged man who cites Virgil at the deathbed of his heir ("Tu Marcellus eris . . . Purpureos spargam flores") but refuses the dead man official honors and grieves above all for himself ("All that has already cost the State too much money . . . . I leaned against a crumbling wall"); the irritated complaint of the sick man ("The doctors have killed me!") whose last motto was nonetheless *Patientia*. Very little to go on: bits of voice out of which to reconstitute an entire tone or timbre of voice, the way others reconstitute a broken statue out of fragments of marble. And someone may say that tone and timbre here are nothing other than temperament, comportment, or character traits. I would agree. If the language of our characters is so important, that is because it expresses or betrays them completely.

I don't flatter myself that I always succeeded. A passage that delights many readers, the almost lyric description of Hadrian's voyages with Antinous through Greece and Asia, seems to me now a piece of bravura, an aria which focuses on what I have Hadrian call the summit of his years of happiness. I still believe that the emperor, retrospectively calling up his memories, could have seen them that way, vividly colored like the large frescoes at Herculaneum, stylized like the bas-reliefs of his hunts on the medallions of the future Arch of Constantine. But I no longer believe that he would have recounted them in quite that fashion—or, if so, am I then to suppose that at that moment he would plunge into a sort of Propertian or Tibullan elegy, making use, as it were, of all the resources of literature? I don't hold the passage against him, or against myself. It is always difficult to recount a moment of happiness.

I had the opportunity to verify, as if with a touchstone, the authenticity of another passage. A professor asked his students to translate into Greek (I should like to be able to say *retranslate*) that page where the emperor describes the state of atony which overcame him after the death of Antinous. I attempted it as well. Immediately, the *addenda* in a more modern tone became as discernible as the plaster which joins two fragments of a statue. Let me cite the passage, putting in italics the part which, quite definitely, does not work: "The journey up the river continued, but my course lay on the Styx. In prisoners' camps on the banks of the Danube I had once seen wretches continually beating their heads against a wall *with a wild motion, both mad and tender*, endlessly repeating the same name. In the underground chambers of the Colosseum I had been shown lions pining away because the dog with which their keepers had accustomed them to live had been taken away. I tried to collect my thoughts: Antinous was dead . . . ." Eight words refused to be written in Greek; they could have been written a bit more easily in Latin, a language which already underscores emotions as ours does. But in which language had I imagined that Hadrian, who was bilingual, was dictating his *Memoirs* to me? No doubt, sometimes in Latin and sometimes in Greek—which gave me a certain freedom. Yet there are moments when, inadvertently, I caused him to speak the French of my day, and these eight words seem to me, as I reread them, to constitute one such moment. The reader will ask why I do not then remove them. Because the impression, if not the expression, seems authentic to me, and because I regard inexactitude a bit the way the emperor, in my opinion, regarded risk—that is, after all precautions have been taken, it is right to let inexactitude play its part, and even to welcome the enrichments it may bring us. On condition, of course, that the part should be as small as possible.

Before leaving the emperor, I should like to protest against an adjective I too often see affixed to the title *Memoirs of Hadrian* in

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articles that are otherwise full of praise, and that is *apocryphal*. *Apocryphal* is used, or should only be used, for what is false and tries to pass as true. The ballads of Ossian composed by Macpherson were apocryphal because they pretended to be by Ossian. Fraud is implicit in the word. My observation is neither irritable nor, it seems to me, trifling: that improper adjective (it would be better to speak of *Imaginary Memoirs*) indicates how little critics, and the public, are accustomed to the passionate reconstitution, at once detailed and free, of a moment or a man out of the past.

The Abyss is polyphonic rather than monodic. It contains many conversations, from brief exchanges of a practical nature—yet inevitably charged with some emotional potential—to meandering dialogues where two interlocutors in agreement, or in partial disagreement, pass an idea back and forth between them in perfect trust, or, on the contrary, through double and triple layers of dissembled thought. Unlike *Memoirs of Hadrian*, the book is not written in the first person: that is to say, its world is not seen and described by one central character. In fact, just as I had felt early on that the tone of *Memoirs of Hadrian* would gain in accuracy from passing through the voice of the emperor, I quickly perceived that in *The Abyss* the contrast between the tone of voice of a modern narrator and that of characters from another century would be intolerable, and that the narrated parts should be done as much as possible in the indirect style, sometimes passing through Zeno himself or some other major or minor character, sometimes through "the voice of the people," as if through a muffled and almost always half-witted choral whispering. Life reconsidered by Hadrian from the perspective of memory gave way to life experienced from day to day at a level very close to the level of spoken language.

Up to a point, the literary style of the sixteenth century helped me with its concreteness and directness and a specificity it had inherited from one aspect of the Middle Ages. But verbal exchanges as such are as rare as they are in the literature of antiquity. The Latin dialogues of Erasmus are to the highest degree *written*. Those of Aretino furnish a mine of information about the low-life of his time, but they belong to the genre, which abounds everywhere, of the more or less satirical rendering of popular life. Italian comedy is highly stylized. The actual "words" reported by the chroniclers of the time mostly consist, as with the ancients, not of bits of conversation but of memorable phrases, like that response (so fine because so immediate) made by the wife of the Admiral de Coligny to her husband who had given her two weeks to make a dangerous decision: "The two weeks are already over, sir." ("My husband, the fortnight is already passed" from the mouth of Hilzonde in *The Abyss* echoes this, in a similar situation.) The same is true of the odious jokes uttered by the German Schopp at Bruno's execution, which I borrowed for Zeno's trial. Only Shakespeare and, here and there, his Elizabethan emulators give us—but a generation after the date when *The Abyss* ends—the lively tone of verbal exchanges in the sixteenth century, at least in those passages where a certain rhetoric hasn't smothered them. But that passionate rhetoric is itself characteristic of the time: some of the lyrical soliloquies of Lear or Hamlet, which audibly belong to the world of the theater, nonetheless tell us something about the language for emotions violently felt by certain especially strong or thoughtful people. They shed a light on the thinking, feeling men at the end of that century which we don't have again in the same intensity for any other era before our own.

There is a constant shifting between the written and the spoken in certain works of the sixteenth century. Not in all, of course: the humanists who copied antiquity destroyed scholastic routines of thought and expression, but only to create others, essentially oratorical, which have sometimes lasted down to our time. Those works we still read, in any case, are very close to the oral mode. When we read Montaigne, we often

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feel we are silently participating in a unilateral conversation; all the freshness and rudeness of common speech is in Luther. The exchange of indignant letters between Agrippa of Nottesheim and an honest curate of Metz on the subject of a scandalous Inquisition affair has all the heat of oral testimony. In the *Journal* which Dürer kept as a strictly personal memorandum and in more of a spoken than a written style, his notes on the death of his mother burst from the page in the midst of his financial accounts and descriptions of wayside lodgings, and we are haunted by the mixture of sketches and incomplete phrases he jotted down when he awoke from a nightmare.

Beyond such intimate works, we encounter the secret ones. Privately, in his mirror writing, Leonardo composed *Notebooks* which were for him alone; and the fact that they have appeared only by accident some three centuries later gives us the feeling of entering, unencumbered by any intermediary interpretation, into the very interior of a man of genius making a record of himself without any witnesses. They are unliterary notebooks, for Leonardo was even more of an autodidact than Zeno; yet they achieve the poetry of pure *tone*, like everything that comes directly from the self. Some of the secret reports of the ambassadors of Venice have the sound of a whispering voice. The soiled pages, in an Italian jargon besmirched with Latin, of the scribe who put down in writing the incoherent mumblings of Campanella when he was being subjected to torture, or those of the informer who noted down the words the philosopher exchanged with his friend Fra Pietro Ponzio in prison, seem even more literally slices of life, cries torn from a man thrashing about in anguish and the clandestine echo of a conversation that was already clandestine. In their time, they were shown only to the rather absent-minded or astute eyes of the judges; then they were buried in the judicial archives of the Kingdom of Naples until their publication in 1886; yet it seems as though their specific horror has not evaporated in the slightest in the time between the actual event and now. In *The Abyss*, I made no use of the first of these documents, having spared Zeno torture in order to avoid any touch of melodrama; from the second I took only the affectionate Fra Pietro's "eamus ad dormiendum" and his "cor meum," which Zeno hears murmured out of the depths of his past by the voice of another friend a quarter of an hour before his death. Yet no other piece of writing has ever so vividly brought me the *auditory* shock of the crumbling of the walls of time.

The fact that we still have an oral knowledge of the language, or rather the languages, that Zeno speaks (for if Hadrian is bilingual, Zeno is polyglot), which we shall never have of the Latin and Greek of the second century, contributed to this drift toward spoken language in *The Abyss*. Despite the fact that French changed, mostly for the worst and in the direction of a narrowing and constraining propriety, between about 1550 and the present, still, many of my characters' phrases would have come into my mouth just as they were. At the risk of creating the impression of excessive meticulousness, I confess to having turned to dictionaries for every doubtful word, that is, for each word which I suspected had entered the language after the sixteenth century or, at most, after the beginning of the seventeenth; and those words I ruthlessly suppressed because they carried with them ideas that my characters could not have had in that form. With almost equal care, I did my best to avoid as much as possible every word which had ceased to be in common usage after the end of the sixteenth century and which I might have been tempted to use out of a love for the picturesque or the archaic, with no other valid psychological reason. It is because of words or phrases inserted to give a sense of period that the "historical novel" disqualifies itself, just as often as it does because of anachronisms.

Let me give a few examples. The word *Protestant* is used from time to time from the beginning of the sixteenth century, but it still wavers imperceptibly between its

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current meaning (a member of a Christian religion) and its meaning as an active participle (a man who protests); and subsequently it is laden for the reader with meanings that come from more recent stages of Protestantism. It is above all in its meaning of an armed faction that it is used in *The Abyss*, as is the word *Catholic* as well ("the Protestant princes," "our Catholics"). *Huguenot* is meaningful only against a French background, and the characters of this novel live mostly in the lands of the Holy Roman Empire; moreover, it is almost as aggressively archaic a word as *rapier*. The words *Lutherans*, *Calvinists*, and *Anabaptists*, which have a narrower focus, are more useful for our particular subject: they indicate to what degree these groups were still perceived as separate, sometimes violently divergent, not yet fused into an entity perceived from without as monolithic. The same observation applies to *Iconoclasts*, which sometimes designates Anabaptists, sometimes Calvinists, sometimes both, and which gives us nothing more than what the bourgeoisie of the large Flemish towns deigned to know about some dangerous rebels. "Members of the supposedly Reformed Religion" is an adequate designation on the lips of ecclesiastics and jurists. When I looked into some of the translations of *The Abyss*, I discovered that Captain Henry Maximilian spoke of syphilis like a twentieth-century sociologist, instead of referring to the good old pox of the soldier; the fact that the learned word figures in a Latin allegory composed by a doctor of the period makes no difference, since it became a word of common usage only much later, and then initially as a euphemism. The word *bugger* suffered a good deal at the hands of some of my translators. Some prudishly rendered it as *heretic*, which wouldn't have been right except in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries; others made it into a sort of *good old chap*, much too modern, even though the word must have rapidly slipped into that sort of meaning. The sexual significance eluded them, even though it was present in the usage of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Patriot*, which acquires currency only in the eighteenth century, would have been ridiculous in popular speech around 1550, yet it is often found in the *Chronicles of the Troubles in the Low Countries*. Anticipating by at least two centuries, the literate bourgeoisie of those provinces, in their struggle against the hereditary ruler from Spain, in fact took it from their reading in Greek and Latin, adapting it in their own fashion. It was appropriate to the cultivated speech of the Prior of the Cordeliers ("My godson, Monsieur de Withem, one of the Patriots . . ."). The adjective *Belgic* is another word that caused me problems. Some readers who were not very *au courant* about the history of the language believed it was born around 1830, when, instead, it died, to be replaced by the word *Belgian*, and was rather awkwardly reincarnated in the proper name of a then-new nation. Certain worn-out words can serve, like a nail, to fix a date, and their use is then legitimate: when Zeno emerges from his meditation on time and space and recalls that at that moment he is lying on a corner of Belgic soil, that adjective takes him back into the sixteenth century.

Ancient man, at least when he belonged to that small minority of cultivated minds which hides from us all the other, illiterate minds of the time, tended, on principle, to rationalize the irrational and to move from the particular and concrete to the general and essential. With certain specific exceptions, of course: in history, as I've already said, Suetonius; in art, the carvers of Roman portrait busts. The great minds of the sixteenth century, again with certain specific exceptions, individualize and particularize. One has only to compare an anecdote of Plutarch with its retelling by Montaigne to be convinced of this. The language of *The Abyss* was obliged to take account of this specificity in practically every line. The vocabulary of the sixteenth century is, happily, close enough to our own so that a specific word for the designation of a specific object only occasionally causes the modern reader a semantic shock. Had I wished to

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render every detail of every incident of Hadrian's life, I should have had cautiously to get round the words *triclinium*, *quadriga*, and *sella curulis*, partly to avoid any pedantry, but especially to leave antiquity its aspect of unencumbered space—which aspect is patently false, and yet at the same time is also partially true if one recalls that the Near East or even Italy had always tended toward a simple way of life, even in ostentation. In *The Abyss*, on the contrary, every word referring to an object, as well as the object itself, is often (for how much longer?) familiar enough to us to become, when Zeno's meditation demands it, suddenly *unfamiliar*—which an object or a word belonging to a civilization too far back from ours could not achieve. For the painters of the northern Renaissance, objects form a whole with the personage represented and, sometimes, overwhelming him, acquire a disquieting sort of life of their own; so also in *The Abyss*, the objects, and accordingly the words that designate them, become the expression of a certain rapport or the sign of a certain submission to necessity. Thus, to choose from among many examples: the bowl of soup that Zeno takes in the refectory of the convent after a sleepless night at the bedside of the prior, the blade less than two inches long which will open the way to death for him, and the nightshirt he uses to stuff up the space between the door and the floor of his prison so that the guard will not see blood on the floor of the corridor. Each precise word became a part of the conditioning of the characters, that conditioning which most of them submit to passively, but which some, like Zeno, explore and, to a certain extent, manage to rid themselves of, even at the cost of their lives.

What I've said about words designating deeds and things should also be said about words which characterize individuals. In *Memoirs of Hadrian*, even had the book been written in a "polyphonic" style (and this is a good reason why it wasn't), we would have heard almost no specific differences between the language of Arrian, Attianus, Chabrius, and Hadrian himself; the variants would be ones of temperament (the tone of Trajan, for example, would sometimes have had to be more jovial, sometimes more imperious than that of Hadrian); the intellectual orientations—Stoicism for one, Pythagorianism for another, Pyrrhonism for a third—would at most have been perceived as subtle nuances: taken together, these intelligent men belong to an all-embracing culture and, at least at their level of society, speak more or less the same language. The tonal differences among the characters of *The Abyss* form a series of opposing angles—in part, to be sure, because time has not eroded to the same extent the conflict of their opinions, the consequences of which still affect us; in part, above all, because sixteen centuries of often badly formed notions, or notions that shouldn't have been formed at all, have dug indelible furrows into men's minds. Rightly or wrongly, the ancient world seems to us less scarred. The three ecclesiastics introduced into *The Abyss* do not speak the same language, and none of them *knows* completely, or at least doesn't *use* completely, that of Zeno. The philosopher and the canon appear to converse, yet almost none of the underlying ideas of the former reaches into the man of the Church, who is nevertheless judicious in his fashion, and nothing of the experience of the unfaithful monks really penetrates his legalistic and theological mind, even though he is their judge: they might just as well have lived in another time and another world. The bishop's impersonal tone is nothing other than that of the schools of his day: it teaches us nothing about the man. The very spontaneous language of the Prior exists on at least three levels: that of the former statesman who is well informed about public affairs; that of the director of conscience and the father superior, who is strict and austere; and that of the man of prayer. Zeno, with a clearly warranted prudence or a defiance of the Church the Prior represents (combined with a tenderness for who he *is*), sometimes feigns not to understand his poignant confidences; but it is no doubt also true that the profound

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plainsong of charity in the words of his pious protector eludes him, at least at first. In contrast, the Prior penetrates the mind of his interlocutor more than Zeno realizes, yet he voluntarily places a zone of silence between his friend's overly audacious thoughts and his own ("Pray do not insinuate a thing which I do not wish to hear"). The captain Henry Maximilian, a man with an open mind, who has had the experience of certain humanist teachings and is bound to Zeno by shared memories of childhood, *hears* the words the philosopher speaks; beyond a certain point, though, he no longer follows them. Princes and merchants confine themselves to their professional vocabulary of merchants and princes.

Zeno's language is made out of successive formations. The oldest is the Flemish of the street, the servants' hall, of the more or less clandestine encounters with workmen, which comes back to the surface during the last years he spends in Bruges. The French spoken in his home is already a language of culture; it is also the language of the books he writes and of his conversations with the Captain and the Prior of the Cordeliers. But the German, Italian, Spanish, and even Arabic from his years of wandering vie for position with French. The Latin from his scholastic education unfailingly returns to his lips; if he thinks with these various tools of language, he reasons in Latin, or at least with the aid of the logical principles which come to him from that language: that is why I planted a bit of that Latin, which has no connections with that of the humanists, here and there in his talk, like so many signposts. The scientific language, with its mathematical metaphors as they would have been formulated in the seventeenth century, is clearly not yet his own; the language of experiments, which is his, also belongs to the artisans with whom he works and the sick people he takes care of, German in Lübeck, Flemish in Bruges. One of his distractions in prison will be to contrive an ideal language for himself which is free from any constraint except that of logic. In the chapter entitled "The Abyss," where he finds himself on the borders of the inarticulate and the ineffable, words and even concepts become silent; the differing states of consciousness are translated into the metaphors of alchemy, in which float all the recurrent myths of humanity.

I believe I came to this spontaneity of language, which is beyond thought or speech, only toward the end of the first section of the book. With very few exceptions (the most notable of which is perhaps the day spent by Zeno in the forest of Houthuist), the first hundred pages preserve the tone of a chronicle; the few conversations are composed of what the author assumes her characters would have said in those circumstances: they do not spontaneously flow from their lips. The account of the festivities at Dranoutre interrupted by the arrival of the weavers is composed contrapuntally, and each voice enters only for its appropriate part, too measured to be anything more than a sonorous tag. The conversation between Zeno and Wiwine is written to the tune of a ballad, but it's hard for me to know whether that was because I was satisfied with that stylized form and that rather superficial level, or whether the young girl herself could not have spoken otherwise, or even the young Zeno, who surrenders to the game. In any case, it doesn't seem to me that complete freedom of language is achieved until the moment when Zeno, matured and already beginning to age, meets his comrade Henry Maximilian again at Innsbruck. From that moment until the end of the book, I had the impression I was a bit farther away from the reconstruction of life in the sixteenth century and a bit closer to that life itself.

—translated from the French
by Walter Kaiser

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Constantine FitzGibbon: a portrait

by Denys Sutton

Constantine FitzGibbon (1919-1983) is generally remembered for his vivid *Life of Dylan Thomas* (1965), a volume that effectively recounts the troubled existence of a true bohemian whose passion for words was combined with a Celtic enthusiasm for drink. Constantine had wider interests than writing books about others, however. For example, he made a mark as a novelist able to relate his characters to topical political events, as is shown in one of his most original books, *The Iron Hoop* (1949), which even stands comparison with the fiction of Kafka.

Constantine was also an alert journalist who in general commented with sureness and insight on ideas and situations. But he did not follow the fashionable leftish line of the day; he was his own man. Thus he often earned the contempt of the radical-chic brigade because he was prepared to champion opinions that ran counter to those favored by most of the intelligentsia. He was even dubbed a fascist, but he was the least authoritarian of men, except when it came to securing a drink before the pubs closed. In fact, he was a humanist who loved life and never spared himself if principles were at stake.

Constantine believed in ideals, even if by doing so he would run into trouble. That he enjoyed taking an independent line was due in no small degree to his ancestry, of which he was justifiably proud. On his father's side he was descended from John Fitzgibbon, first Earl of Clare, the Irish patriot who presented the Irish case during the discussions leading up to the Act of Union in 1802. His mother's family was Old New York (Stuyvesant) and pure New England (Winthrop); indeed, his Folcomb grandfather had been offered an ambassadorship by President Grover Cleveland. This mixture of enthusiasm for a cause and an almost puritan adherence to principle helped to give Constantine his special character. He combined Irish flair with American vitality.

I had the good fortune to meet him at Exeter College, Oxford, shortly before the Second World War. We had much in common: we were both keen on art and literature. Then we were horrified by the growing menace of Hitler and by the blindness of many of our contemporaries to this danger. Constantine, who had gone as a student to Germany in May of 1935 when not yet sixteen, and who had even been presented to Hitler at the Munich opera a year later, fanned my interest in things German. He told me about the Expressionists (then banned in Germany) and gave me several volumes of Goethe and Rilke as well as a print by Grosz, a treasured possession that vanished during the war. When visiting Berlin in the early summer of 1939, I made a point of spending an evening at the Jockey Club, a nightclub from which he had been chucked out for mocking the Nazis.

Constantine had a sharp eye for the art and literature of the 1930s. This is shown in the

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contents of the two numbers of the small magazine *Yellowjacket* which he edited while up at Oxford. These contain pieces by Jean Cocteau, Henri de Montherlant, John Betjeman, T. F. Powys, and Dylan Thomas. The composer John Gardner, then a music student at Exeter, wrote an article about Kurt Weill, who was then virtually unknown in England. I became art editor and contributed an article on Coldstream, Pasmore, and the Euston Road School. Constantine encouraged me to translate Brecht's *Trommeln in der Nacht*, but my German was not adequate to the task.

Much of Constantine's youth had been spent in Paris, where his mother had remarried in 1926. Her new husband was a distant cousin, Bertram Winthrop, a wealthy lawyer who could have stepped out of the pages of Edith Wharton. Constantine was very much the proverbial American in Paris, finding a natural home with the art crowd on the Left Bank. When we were there together he introduced me to the delights of still champagne and of various night spots. Through him I met an artist called Zawado, a friend of one of his sisters. In my eyes, Montparnasse lived up to its reputation as the artists' quarter of legend; Zawado's studio looked like the one in the picture by C. R. W. Nevinson in the Tate Gallery.

French literature meant much to Constantine. In the early years, he loved Rimbaud's poetry and became the "official" translator of Cocteau's *Les Parents terribles*. Both of us admired Henri de Montherlant's novel, *Pitié pour les femmes*, doubtless identifying ourselves with the hero. An appreciation of modernism did not entail any lack of respect for tradition on Constantine's part. He was fascinated by French medieval poetry and adored Racine, even translating *Britannicus*, a remarkable feat for a young man not yet twenty-one. Constantine's excellent version was produced at a small theater in Shere by his close friend Harold Scott, an actor and an expert on the music hall. Constantine's vivacious girlfriend Giselle had a part in it.

Constantine's choice of *Britannicus*, a strongly political drama, was indicative of his belief in absolutes, a belief that became more pronounced with the years. He may well have been a bohemian, but he respected form. He was more reticent than might have been expected. He never let on that, before coming up to Oxford his girlfriend Giselle, whose portrait in the nude hung in his rooms in college, had given birth to a stillborn child. Nor, understandably, did he say anything about his father being a drug addict. These experiences gave him a maturity then rare among British undergraduates, whose lives were usually sheltered.

In those days Constantine was terribly hard up. The weekly allowance of three pounds made to him by his mother ceased on his attaining his majority. Yet he had confidence in his star. Notwithstanding his financial situation, he married a beautiful half-Burmese girl, Margaret Aye Moung, who had been up at Oxford with us, but as they really did not love one another, this relationship quickly ended. He hated to be alone. He found a delightful girl, who is called Charlotte in his autobiography *Through the Minefields* (1966). They lived in London in a tumbledown flat on the corner of Walton Street and Draycot Avenue while he worked in an insurance firm in the city.

When the war broke out, Constantine, though the holder of an American passport, tried to join the Royal Air Force and then the Fleet Air Arm, but he was rejected because of defective sight in one eye. However, he enlisted in the Irish Guards, was given a commission in the Intelligence Corps (failing the course at the intelligence training school at Matlock in Derbyshire), and then transferred to the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry. When this regiment became airborne, he was moved on account of his eyesight to the "Young Soldiers" Battalion and stationed in Northern Ireland.

Constantine was on leave in Dublin when the United States entered the war. The day after Pearl Harbor, with characteristic self-assurance, he presented himself at the American Embassy (then in Phoenix Park) with the request that he be allowed to join

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the United States Army. In the meantime he was turned down for the Commandos and posted to Military Intelligence. Eventually, in December 1942, he was transferred to the United States Army, whereupon his pay was immediately tripled. He was in his element when serving with the Twelfth Army Corps in France and when he was in charge of the military appreciation of the German order of battle. His commander was General Bradley, to whom he was deeply attached. At the end of the war Constantine was employed in the Military Intelligence Research Section which, on behalf of the War Office and the War Department, was conducting a survey of the German General Staff; he edited a volume consisting of contributions by German officers who were prisoners of war.

His military career might have come to a sticky end. When the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Japan, he wrote a letter of protest to the President. This had to go "through channels." Constantine was surprised that he never had an answer; but he later realized that in all probability his superior officer most sensibly had thrown it in the wastepaper basket.

During part of the war Constantine resided in Chelsea with his second wife, Theodora FitzGibbon, whose memoirs (*With Love*) provide amusing pictures of London life in the 1940s. It was typical of Constantine that, although it was against regulations to wear mufti, he would change, usually into an old black corduroy suit, before setting out for an evening in the pub. On these expeditions he would run into such figures as Augustus John, Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins, John Davenport, and Norman Douglas. He later claimed with a touch of hyperbole that this "heroic" period of Chelsea club life was akin to that of the cafés of prewar Paris, and he successfully evoked it in his biography of Dylan Thomas. It is a pity that Constantine never wrote a history of bohemianism, a subject selected for a book by a character in one of his novels.

Constantine's military superiors thought highly of him. When hostilities ceased he was offered a choice of posts: either assistant military attaché at the American Embassy in London or a position with the CIA, which was then coming into being. He turned down these proposals. He was determined to write. After demobilization he spent a year as a schoolmaster at Saltus Grammar School, Bermuda, where he and Theodora were lent a cottage by an aunt. He wrote what is perhaps his most subtle novel, *The Arabian Bird* (1949), which conveys much of the atmosphere of wartime London as well as providing excellent character studies.

At this stage, fortune seemed to smile on Constantine. He received a contract to write an official life of Norman Douglas, who was then in his eighties. It was a happy choice. The two men had first met in London in 1944. Shortly afterward, Douglas told me over dinner at the Phoenix in Smith Street, Chelsea, of his admiration for Constantine, to whom he was related. The two men spent pleasant afternoons drinking wine and basking in the Capri sun. Unfortunately, Constantine felt unable to continue with the plan because of the difficulty, given the climate of opinion at the time, of discussing Douglas's sexual proclivities. So, regretfully, he gave it up. Fortunately, not all the work was wasted. He wrote a preface to a book of pictures of Douglas (1953) and published in *Encounter* (in September 1974) an account of his time in Capri with "Uncle Norman." This effective piece is yet another instance of his literary virtuosity.

There was a touch of the soldier of fortune about Constantine. He was not unduly disheartened when he arrived in London penniless, leaving many debts behind him in Italy, where his wife tried to scrape together a living in the cinema world of Rome. Constantine was a survivor. He was lent a cottage in the country by Harold Scott and made ends meet by translating Manès Sperber's huge novel *The Wind and the Flame*. Sperber, who was born in the Ukraine, had been a Communist leader in Germany and, after the advent of Hitler, had fled to Russia. After the Moscow Purge

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Trials of 1937, however, he broke with the Communists and became a fugitive both from the Gestapo and the NKVD. Sperber's experience further strengthened Constantine's detestation of Communism.

He enjoyed translating, and turned into English over thirty books from French, German, and, on one occasion, Italian. Yet living on the edge of Grub Street was precarious. Nor was his marriage going well. He and Theodora drifted apart, partly because they had few mutual interests. He had started off as a man of letters, then had been a man of action, and now increasingly was becoming a political animal. He was concerned by the fate of the Western world and had been influenced by Spengler's famous book *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, which he had read toward the end of the war. He was certain that, if the West relaxed, Russia would move in. As a young man in Munich, he had run into an SS officer who told him of the natural affinities between Nazism and Communism; he never forgot the experience. Constantine expressed his thoughts and fears in his novel *When the Kissing Had to Stop* (1960), which relates what England's fate might be if the conservatives were ousted by a left-wing government with an anti-nuclear policy and if the Russians occupied the country. The book was a huge success, giving pleasure in some quarters—Lord Avon was one fan—and arousing fury in others. Constantine now became a bogeyman of the Left. In fact, he had never been particularly right-wing; if anything, he had been liberal with slightly leftish inclinations. His great asset was to grasp the reality of a situation; his intuition told him that the policy of the unilateralist Left would end in disaster. Some of his earlier political statements appear in a volume humorously called *Random Thoughts of a Fascist Hyena* (1963).

After the success of his novel, Constantine acquired a property in the country. He sold it to buy another house and finally purchased Waterston Manor in Dorset. He settled there with his third wife, Marion Gutman, whose grandfather had been a founder of the Dresdner Bank. Constantine enjoyed being lord of the manor and engaged a butler, one of whose duties was to bring him, at six sharp, a large whiskey and soda on a silver platter. Never a man to worry about debts (his attitude toward them was that of an Edwardian ne'er-do-well), Constantine soon overspent. It was characteristic of his grand view that he once phoned me up to ask if he could bring over fourteen guests for luncheon! Smart though he was, he failed to realize that one successful novel does not spell everlasting security. His subsequent fiction never did as well as *When the Kissing Had to Stop*, though the book's immediate successor, *Going to the River* (1963), is one of his best; the Paris scenes are particularly attractive.

He soon had another literary success. This was with his readable life of Dylan Thomas. The writing of this book sparked problems of a practical nature: the research about Thomas had necessitated numerous interviews with the poet's friends, and what could be more natural for a convivial author than that these should take place over a drink? Constantine had enjoyed alcohol ever since I knew him. Now he began to drink heavily, and when he was in his cups an unfortunate "personality change"—which had already appeared during his years with Theodora—began to occur more frequently. Understandably, his marriage ran into difficulties. He and Marion divorced. Like most dramas of this sort, blood was spilled on both sides and regrets were entertained, but Constantine, never a man to hold a grudge, spoke and wrote about her with the kindness and understanding typical of an American-Irish gentleman. He was deeply attached to their son, Francis.

Constantine had always felt rather an outsider in England, even when we were snugly ensconced at the Carlton Club in Oxford. The inordinate expenses incurred over his divorce disgusted him. He became disenchanted with English life; moreover, this unusual moralist deplored what he considered to be the decadence of English

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society. Certain passages in his life of Dylan Thomas show that he was nostalgic for the old ways. He was determined to get out as soon as he could.

The new start he needed was provided by Ireland. This country gave him fresh subject matter. He produced a novel, *High Heroic* (1969), based on the life of Michael Collins, a biography of Eamon de Valera (1973), and other Irish books. After a bleak period on his own, he remarried. His new bride, Marjorie Steele, who came from Nevada, was a charming actress who had become a painter and sculptor.

From the outside Constantine's existence looked attractive. He had a beautiful and warmhearted wife, a handsome and valuable house at Killiney, and a secure reputation. He soon made numerous friends in Dublin, enjoyed becoming a member of the Irish Academy of Letters, and earned the gratitude of his fellow writers by providing the germ of an idea that led Mr. Charles Haughey, then Finance Minister in the Irish government, to permit creative artists to live tax-free in Eire.

Behind this pleasing façade turmoil raged. Both he and his wife had a weakness for drink. With considerable courage and frankness he described their problems and experiences in his book entitled *Drink*, published in 1979 after they had both conquered their addiction. It joins the select band of volumes by Charles Jackson, Malcolm Lowry, and Scott Fitzgerald that treat of this painful subject. Constantine's book is as harrowing as a play by Eugene O'Neill, especially for those who admired him. Moreover, he had to contend with operations for cataracts; when affected by bouts of depression he was unable to walk. Despite such troubles, books and articles flowed from his pen.

During this time he was passionately involved in the Irish question. In his view, it was a mistake to keep British troops in Northern Ireland and to have "internment camps" established. Like many others with friends in both Ireland and England, he was torn by the Irish problem. He felt that one of the chief obstacles to any settlement lay in the profound difference between the Irish and British temperaments: the British would see two sides to every question; the Irish either one or thirty-eight. In the end he believed that only time would solve this desperate and contentious situation.

Although concerned with Ireland and Irish affairs—his last and posthumously published book is on this country—he was essentially a man for whom major experiences had been the emergence of Nazi Germany, the 1939 war, and the expansion of Russian imperialism. In fact, as late as 1960, he wrote a powerful article on Auschwitz (*Encounter*, April); significantly, also, his last novel, *In the Bunker* (1973), dealt with the final days of Hitler. This was the world in which he had grown up and which he felt in his bones. Although he had seen the fall of most of the continent of Europe, he was not a pessimist; he stuck by the family motto *Dum Spiro Spero* ("While there is breath, there is hope"). Perhaps for this reason, at the time of his death he was engaged in writing about Charlemagne, the founder of Europe.

Every time it was my good fortune to cross to Dublin I would see Constantine; he was almost my oldest surviving friend. Despite his tribulations about which, true to form, he refused to bore his pals (self-pity was not for him), he was little changed. He was as sharp-witted, as entertaining, and as affectionate as ever. Perhaps he tended to dwell on the past, but then most of us do so with age. On the last occasion we met, both he and his wife had become teetotalers; I felt a twinge of conscience drinking the wine I had ordered for dinner at a restaurant in Dublin Bay. During the evening I realized what a splendid fellow he was, how true he had been to himself and to his ideals. His old-fashioned concept of honor was most congenial. It was typical of his integrity that when, through secret information, he learned that the Germans might drop an atom bomb on London, he never suggested to his wife, who was living there, that she should leave the city. In keeping with his

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code of conduct, he refused to talk about Ultra (a method by which the German military code was cracked), as he had given his word to keep such information secret. He detested betrayal; hence his understanding of the dilemmas of the German officers who were opposed to Hitler.

Constantine was an all-round man of letters, as able to produce a translation of La Rochefoucauld as to compose a history of Germany and to comment on political situations, being prepared in this respect to arouse controversy as he did with his support for the Greek colonels; later, he modified his position. As a novelist he sought to succeed by recounting modern history, following the tradition of Stendhal or, for that matter, Koestler. His portraits in *When the Kissing Had to Stop* are admirable: Leonard Brathewaite, the Grand Old Man of the Left, and Rupert Page-Gorman, the obnoxious left-wing politician, who connived with the Russians and ended up for his pains in Siberia, may be stereotypes, but they are "speaking likenesses" who remain always with us. Constantine's novels stress his need to be "engaged" and even suggest that, when the tension was absent, his demon, the black dog of melancholia, constantly snapped at his heels.

He was a romantic and a rebel. He believed absolutely in independence. This comes out in its sharpest form in a talk entitled "The Right to Resist," which he delivered in 1959 in Innsbruck at the one hundred fiftieth anniversary celebration of the birth of Andreas Hofer, and again at the Congress for Cultural Freedom at Cologne in 1962. He argued that even if resistance did not succeed, the fact of its existence was what counted. "Did the possibility of resistance not exist," he wrote, "mankind would long ago have surrendered, permanently and forever to lies, violence and disorder. It is the action of resistance that counts." Constantine knew only too well that freedom has to be fought for in each generation.

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Poems *by Dana Gioia, Donald Hall, Wesley McNair & Floyd Skloot*

Prayer

Echo of the clocktower, footstep
in the alleyway, sweep
of the wind sifting the leaves.

Jeweller of the spiderweb, connoisseur
of autumn's opulence, blade of lightning
harvesting the sky.

Keeper of the small gate, choreographer
of entrances and exits, midnight
whisper travelling the wires.

Seducer, healer, deity or thief,
I will see you soon enough—
in the shadow of the rainfall,

in the brief violet darkening a sunset—
but until then I pray watch over him
as a mountain guards its covert ore

and the harsh falcon its flightless young.

—Dana Gioia

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Planting a Sequoia

All afternoon my brothers and I have worked in the orchard,
Digging this hole, laying you into it, carefully packing the soil.
Rain blackened the horizon, but cold winds kept it over the Pacific,
And the sky above us stayed the dull grey
Of an old year coming to an end.

In Sicily a new father plants a tree to celebrate his first son's birth—
An olive or a fig tree—a sign that the earth has one more life to bear.
I would have done the same, proudly laying new stock into my father's orchard,
A green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs,
A promise of new fruit in other autumns.

But today we kneel in the cold planting you, our native giant,
Defying the practical custom of our fathers,
Wrapping in your roots a lock of hair, a piece of an infant's birth cord,
All that remains above earth of a first-born son,
A few stray atoms brought back to the elements.

We will give you what we can—our labor and our soil,
Water drawn from the earth when the skies fail,
Nights scented with the ocean fog, days softened by the circuit of bees.
We plant you in the corner of the grove, bathed in western light,
A slender shoot against the sunset.

And when our family is no more, all of his unborn brothers dead,
Every niece and nephew scatterred, the house torn down,
His mother's beauty, ashes in the air,
I want you to stand among strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,
Silently keeping the secret of your birth.

—Dana Gioia

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Tomorrow

Although the car radio warned that
"war threatened" as "Europe mobilized,"
we set out for the World's Fair on the
last day of August, nineteen-thirty-
nine. My grandparents came visiting
from New Hampshire to Connecticut
once in three years; it wasn't easy
to find somebody to milk the cows,
to feed the hens and sheep: Maybe that's
why we went ahead, with my father
driving down the new Merritt Parkway
toward Long Island. I was ten years old;
for months I had looked forward to this
trip to the Fair. Everywhere I looked
I saw the Trylon and Perisphere—
on ashtrays, billboards, and Dixie Cups;
in *Life*—: those streamlined structures that stood
for The World of Tomorrow, when Dad
would autogyro to pick up Rick
and Judy from a school so modern
it resembled an Airstream Trailer.
As we drove home late at night—it was
already morning in Warsaw—I
tried not to let my eyes close. My dear
grandfather—wearing a suit instead
of overalls; my grandmother with
pearls from Newberry's—held my hand tight
in silence. Soon I would fall asleep
as we drove down the Parkway, but first
we stop-and-started through city blocks,
grave in the Pontiac heading north
toward Connecticut, past the newsboys
hoarse, dark, and ragged, flapping papers
at the red lights of intersections.

—Donald Hall

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Driving to dark country

Past where the last
gang of signs

comes out of the dark
to wave you back,

and past telephone
wires lengthening

with the light of someone
beyond the next hill

just returning,
a slow single line

will take the eye
of your high beam. Around you

will be jewels
of the fox-watch.

Great trees will rise up
to see you passing by

all by yourself,
riding on light.

—*Wesley McNair*

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Living room

I thought the face of Beethoven glaring
between our piano and easy chair
was my father when he was young. Staring
till his eyes dried up, sparking the wild hair
that would soon fly completely off his head,
my father even then was a wizard
of silent menace, a genius of dread.
He saw me. He knew what I did. He heard
the music of my musings. My mother
played Gershwin oblivious to the scorn
singing along would bring down on me. Her
smile froze, her eyes slowly closed, her voice worn
down by years of smoke broke into sobs when
she lost herself in the old melody.
Not me. I sat beside her silently.

—Floyd Skloot

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Art

Half a dozen contemporaries

by Jed Perl

I'm writing this on a freezing cold day at the beginning of December, as the sun goes down and the sky over New York City's Upper West Side turns an opaque cobalt blue. The moon is up there, a blurred crescent shape; below, the lights are going on across the darkening façades. This is the moment when the city becomes as unreal as a diorama: rushing crowds, massive buildings, and that gorgeously decorative sky. Suddenly, everything we've thought and felt during the day is folded into a big, beautiful romantic vision. The stage manager is nature; but the effect is anything but natural.

Violet Baxter catches something of that moment in her pastels of dusk in New York City's Union Square neighborhood. I didn't know Baxter's work until I saw her show this past October at the Pleiades Gallery. Since seeing the pastels, I've found that they rise up in the mind's eye at the hour when evening comes to the city. Baxter has a studio on Union Square, and in the cycle of "Union Square Variations" that she does in delicate passes of pastel strokes across her paper, she stirs up quite a mood. Her skies are like sheets of velvet: they're blue-violet or orange-red. These never-never-land skies set the romantic tone. At the same time, Baxter is curious about the more prosaic aspects of city life. The ordinary sights that she records from her sky-high window give the full-tilt romanticism its saving caustic edge.

Baxter has a Canaletto-like eye for the changing city. In one pastel, Zeckendorf Towers, the apartment complex at the southeast corner of Union Square, is under construction; in another, we see the monster structure finished, with those neo-medieval postmodern towers all lit up. (These pastels are an important record of the yuppification of an historic artists' neighborhood.) But you don't have to go from one pastel to the next to get the sense of change. Baxter's street lights are flickering, as if they've just gone on; and the crowds of people, which look like waves of colored dust specks down there in the street, recall the masses in motion in some of Boccioni's street scenes. The whole city is caught in a fast dissolve. Baxter gets down the particularities of time and place; the lightness of her touch suggests that it all may dematerialize at any moment.

These pastels were the high points of Baxter's show; the rest of the work was weak, weak, weak. Some tiny gouaches of city façades—snow on a fire escape, for example—have a small, genuine poetry; but when Baxter turns to paint on canvas, all her taste and discrimination disappears. Many of her acrylics seem to be done on dark red grounds, and those grounds give the paintings a hard, closed look. The artist's touch, which is airy and fastidious in the pastels, gets clunky in the acrylics. A series of paintings of rocks and beaches is crude and unfeeling; it's hard to believe that they were done by the same person who did the

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pastels. I suspect Baxter is one of those painters who paint anything they see in front of them. As she works, she may not know the difference between making contact with her motif and just going through the motions. Apparently she can't distinguish once the painting is finished, either—thus the unevenness of her show. But whatever dogged insistence lies behind those overworked acrylics lies behind those lovely pastels as well. What's haunting about the "Union Square Variations" is the absence of contrivance. Baxter just goes deeper and deeper into her motif. In a couple of pastels a leap is taken from earnest documentary into intoxication.

The Reign of Narcissism, a room-sized installation with which the well-known conceptual artist Barbara Bloom made her New York gallery debut at Jay Gorney in October, is a rather slender conceit. (It was first seen in the "Forest of Signs" show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles this past summer.) Taking off on the thought that in these media-conscious times everyone is his or her own publicist, Bloom has concocted an interior in which every available surface—upholstery, decorative moldings, bookbindings—is imprinted with the artist's signature or profile or dental X-rays. Bloom's designer insignia isn't all that evident when one comes into this pale green interior, with its dark-toned side chairs and vitrines; one notices more of these insignias the longer one stays.

I imagine Bloom's intention is to allow her monomania to creep up on us. And yet the overall effect isn't one of growing obsession. The individual elements—Bloom yard goods, Bloom's bust on a pedestal—are so unemphatic that they just slide right by. The one element that had a likable twist to it was a series of cameos of Bloom's profile, made to her specifications by craftsmen in Italy. Of all the endless variations that I've seen in recent years on Walter Benjamin's thesis about the death of the original in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, this has to be the cleverest. The mechanical reproductions that Bloom presents aren't exactly mechanical—they're the work of particular craftsmen—and so Bloom seems to be telling us that even in the mechanical age some bit of personality can shine through. (That cabinet full of cameos is the kind of thing a friend of mine had in mind when she referred to Bloom as "a great shopper.") But that was about it for *The Reign of Narcissism*. I didn't leave the show haunted by Barbara Bloom—which ought to be the effect of spending time in the presence of a megalomaniacal narcissism. Bloom's narcissism is whisper-soft—a depersonalized narcissism. Perhaps this is, as they say, the point.

Perhaps Bloom wants to tell us that there's no joy left even in our self-love. By that logic, the dullness of her room should be a reference to the dullness of our lives. But there's a major problem with the idea that a work of conceptual art can be an impartial mirror held up to our world. Once Bloom has constructed her room, she's used her imagination, and we must respond. What disappoints me in *The Reign of Narcissism* isn't the idea: it's the lack of imagination in the working out of the idea. An artist can begin with a concept, but in the end we have the object. Bloom's book covers and side chairs are bland. I'm not even certain why this narcissistic fantasy was done in a neoclassical style. Barbara Bloom goes nowhere with her "way out" idea.

The painter David Diao, who showed his new paintings at Postmasters in November, is too clever for his own good—his cleverness is a form of nihilism. When Diao juxtaposes a form from a Malevich painting with a form from a Matisse paper cutout, he makes a fairly nifty point about the overriding purism that connects works as dissimilar as these. But the comparison is made in such a glib and blunt manner that Diao ends up devaluing the very things that he's evaluating. When, in *Black Noise*, Diao combines six clones of a Matisse seaweed form with two clones of a Malevich composition of tilting rectangles, the result is as generic as a corporate logo.

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Diao's subject isn't so much modern art as modern taste and the devolution of glorious images into one-dimensional icons. Diao is interested not so much in Matisse or Malevich as in what has become of their work in the design studios of the past forty years. There's no such thing in Diao's world as going back to first principles. Along with the modern icons, he intersperses jokey references to the exegesis of the icons. One painting, of green and red rectangles, is based on the cover of Clement Greenberg's seminal book, *Art and Culture*. Two of the rectangles bear the names "Greenberg" and "Rosenberg"; it's a New York art-crit logo. Another painting is nothing but a blowup of the famous chronology of modern art on the dust jacket of the catalogue of Alfred Barr's 1936 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "Cubism and Abstract Art." Diao's composition takes us into Warhol land: it's a highbrow version of Andy Warhol's paint-by-number paintings, with the five-and-dime version of art replaced by the MOMA version.

I suppose that Diao's point is that Malevich and Matisse, Greenberg and Rosenberg are, culturally speaking, in the same universe as Marilyn Monroe and Troy Donahue, Ethel Scull and Campbell's soup. (Could Diao's work be a nasty joke on the famous opening line of Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"? "One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T. S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover.") But who needs to have Diao leveling everything downward when the everyday facts of life do quite enough leveling down already, thank you? Of course, if Diao did all this with a sense of humor it might be another matter. The late Nicolas Moufarrege's needlepoint paintings did such a gloriously witty job of leveling down that they ended up by leveling up. It's the coldness of Diao's presentation that unnerves me. The coldness and the fact that this artist is widely admired for his rehashes of modern art history. (In the December issue of *Arts Magazine*, a fiftieth-anniversary symposium on Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was illustrated with Diao's Greenberg/Rosenberg painting.)

Does Diao know that some of the people who went to see his show get a lift from Malevich's paintings and Matisse's cutouts and Greenberg's prose? David Diao is intent on ferreting out what pockets of passion and pleasure there are left in the world, and then proving that they're exactly as dehumanized as the stuff on prime-time television. He goes to work like a sadistic brain surgeon. He zooms in on things that are wonderful and he lobotomizes them. I vote this show the most demoralizing event of the season so far.

The paintings in Spencer Gregory's first show, this past October at the Sorkin Gallery, were all rather small (a foot or two in height or width) and rather mysterious. Gregory builds up his surfaces with layers of enamel and oil paint; he dribbles the paint, brushes it, then scrapes it down and starts again. He arrives at such radically different compositions (they range from stripes to craggy configurations to a tiny figure and an ocean wave) that I found myself imagining the artist working improvisationally, not knowing where his paint would lead him. Gregory, who's in his thirties, is caught up in the painting process: this is what impresses me about his work.

Sometimes Gregory's titles begin to tell us something about the paintings. *The Ride* is a landscape-like image, with forms that are geologically layered. The picture with the wave is called *Underneath*, while *Toward Safe Harbor* has a shape that looks like the map of an island. But the titles aren't necessarily an open sesame. *For Jay Phillips* is an inscrutable series of stripes in deep red, black, and green. One begins to think this work is giving up its mysteries; and just then it closes up.

Gregory's paintings have a dark, furrowed atmosphere that recalls American abstract painting in the years before and during the

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Depression—especially the work of the Stieglitz circle. When I was thinking about Gregory, I took Paul Rosenfeld's book *Port of New York* off the shelf, and found a description of Arthur Dove's paintings that fits Gregory's work to a T. "He has dark, pungent, gritty hues in his palette; dark subtle schemes and delicate gradations of earth-browns and dull shadowy greens and dirt-grays and intestiny whites that seem to flow from the body's fearless complete acceptance of itself. Sensitive realizations of metal-tones break through this somber palette; strong vibrant renderings of coppers and silvers. But the ground-tone remains umbrageous and grim and sometimes even dour."

This thing that we call "American" abstraction is characterized by a moody inwardness, a reluctance to fit one's ideas into some large design. Sometimes the artist seems just plain reluctant to be clear. There's a thin line between mystery and obfuscation. (Eventually my mind reverts to the semi-abstract mysteries of a Frenchman like Braque: his enigmatic Bird paintings are crystal clear!) What keeps Gregory's paintings—for the moment—clear *enough* is the simplicity of his process. He's following the logic of his painted surfaces wherever they lead him. But where are they leading him? What is the goal? Spatially, the paintings are extremely peculiar: very flat in places, with all sorts of implications of depth in others. Because of the small scale—and maybe the beautiful light at the Sorkin Gallery—Gregory's works mostly held together. Yet one hankers for an internal logic that Gregory doesn't provide. These are paintings that ask to be loved not in spite of their obfuscations but because of them. I was in like with them.

An artist who's been showing for a number of years and has a following among people who care about painting can find himself in a situation full of possibilities and perils. Exhibiting before a public that's familiar with the strengths of one's earlier work, an artist can be liberated to take risks—to take off into unexplored areas. But there's another thing that can happen: an artist can slough off, confident that the good old audience will give the nod to anything he does.

I suppose that Stanley Lewis, who exhibited his new semi-abstract landscape drawings and paintings at the Bowery Gallery in December, imagines that he's off on some marvelous new direction. But instead of going for broke, Lewis (who's in his late forties) is running on empty—and asking people to come along for the ride anyway. This artist still has his gift for surfaces: the thick oil paint, in beautifully grayed whites and plangent greens and purples, still has a presence; and Lewis still wields a pencil for dramatic effect. There were always some Lewis paintings—a lot of Lewis paintings—in which the artist seemed to be leaning on his facility too much, letting it carry him along. But I've never before seen a Lewis show that was hollow in quite the way this one is—hollow all the way through. Among the pictures here (they include a series based on a street in Northampton, Massachusetts, and another based on a parking lot) there isn't a single impressive work. Lewis wearies me with his swash-buckling effects. The effects have no affect. In retrospect, that room full of slam-bang work is just a blank.

Stanley Lewis is part of the art world's serious crowd—the crowd that likes to shake their heads and go "tsk, tsk" at the mention of Julian Schnabel or David Salle. Lewis taught for years at the Kansas City Art Institute, which had, under the chairmanship of the painter Wilbur Niewald, the greatest undergraduate painting department in this country. And Lewis remains a frequent visitor at the New York Studio School. At both Kansas City and the Studio School there has always been a great deal of talk about the mysteries of optical perception, the essential place of life drawing in the education of the artist, the glorious traditions of painting, the difficulties of the artistic calling—and I would be the last one to deny the importance of any of this. But

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there's a preciosity that can sometimes sift into the thinking of the serious crowd. At Kansas City, Wilbur Niewald kept—and still keeps—much of that at bay with his natural authority. Coming into a Niewald class, students learn that there are rules you have to accept before you can move on—and students respond to Niewald's toughness, because they know that he's not playing down to them. But elsewhere the insularity and underdog self-consciousness of the serious crowd can breed a kind of soft thinking all its own. The serious crowd produces its share of slob-art: it's self-righteous slob-art.

I once heard a member of the serious crowd remark, "Every time I go into my studio, I re-invent the wheel." Now, that's pretty rich. Maybe that's what Stanley Lewis thinks he's doing in his new landscapes. These pictures, in which the motif keeps disappearing into the erasures and globs of paint, are heavy on existential struggle—or is it just the existential merry-go-round? Lewis is into the torment of it all: he makes the paint gritty; he lashes out with his pencil and tears holes in the paper. But there's something preposterous about the heroics, because Lewis isn't getting anywhere. He's confusing ideas with notions, inspiration with strategy.

I'd say there are two basic notions that guide Lewis now. One is the notion that there is some a priori importance to drawing from life, that any assortment of neo-Giacometti marks that are made from life tell us something, even if we don't really know what the hell it is. The other notion is that a painting should have a broken, agitated surface—a neo-de Kooning surface, circa 1950. (For the serious crowd, 1950 was heaven, and you're supposed to wake up every morning and beg God's forgiveness that you were only five years old at the time.) Lewis's two notions don't even really go together, except in a willfully artificial way. He may claim to be working from life, but finally he's working life over, wreaking havoc on the landscape in order to give it that seriously Ab Ex look. Everything hangs on the facture, and the facture is a fiction.

important works by

balthus
butler
chagall
dubuffet
giacometti
lam
mac iver
mason
millares
miró
riopelle
rouan
saura
tanguy
zao wou-ki

pierre matisse gallery
41 east 57th street
new york 10022

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Every painting Lewis has ever done depends to some degree on those neo-Giacometti and neo-de Kooning notions; except when Lewis is really getting somewhere, those notions are subsumed in a heartfelt response to landscape, to the particularities of a place. In the past it has sometimes seemed that Lewis, in spite of his notions, would be carried along by the authenticity of his feelings. But there is always been this superficial side to Lewis: it was there in his last show at Bowery, in October 1987, but at least then there were a half dozen really marvelous paintings. This new show is all superficiality. A painter I know who wrote about Lewis's work some years ago observes that, back in the Seventies when Lewis lived in Kansas City, he tended to show his most fully resolved landscapes in New York. Maybe fifteen years ago Lewis had a sense that the serious crowd in New York would see through his notions: he wanted to put his best work forward. Maybe now he knows how seriously unserious the serious crowd has become (or always was). Maybe now Lewis is playing to their taste for zingy effects, for style (unserious serious style) over substance. Yet younger artists—some of whom were once students of Lewis's—were offended by this show. They came looking for passion and intensity, and found Stanley Lewis playing the Young Turk.

Every once in a while I see one of the abstract paintings that Joan Mitchell did in the 1950s: there was one at the Jan Krugier Gallery earlier this season, and one has been hanging at the Museum of Modern Art of late. It's always a lift to see these pictures, because Joan Mitchell takes command of the canvas with such easy assurance. Mitchell's show of recent paintings, at Robert Miller in November, gave me the same kind of lift. A generation has passed and Mitchell is still the same lyric poet in paint. The paintings are agitated yet calm—all at once.

Mitchell has never pursued a wide range of structures. Her works tend to be made up of a loose network of curvy brushstrokes. This network is porous, fluid: toward the center of the canvas the strokes sometimes gather together, press out toward us; at the sides, they tend to hew close to the edge, sometimes following along the edge. Like many of the Abstract Expressionists, Mitchell has had to combat the dangers of stagnation that are inherent in homogeneous structures. (For a time in the Seventies she filled her paintings with soft-edged rectangular shapes.) Particularly in her triptychs, there is a tendency for the compositions to become too static, with too-predictable concentrations of color toward the centers of the three canvases. (This is the problem with the two large triptychs in this show.) But considering the number of Mitchell paintings that actually open up and breathe, I think it's fair to conclude that there's wisdom in Mitchell's refusal to pursue a broader range of compositional types. For her, the all-over structure is the ordinary business of life. By finding new possibilities in what at first looks old hat, Mitchell makes abstract paintings whose subject is the poetry of the everyday. We go on the same old excursion and find something we never noticed there before.

Three paintings in this show were remarkable: *South*, in which a battery of red-orange-pink strokes rises up from the surface to create a cool frenzy; *Margin*, in which the delicate greens break out of their symmetry into up-and-down and over-and-out passages that hint at a marshy pastoral; and *River*, in which yellows and blacks and blues ebb and flow into vast panoramic effects.

About twenty years ago, the poet John Ashbery remarked of Mitchell's relation to nature—and that of the Abstract Expressionists in general—that "one's feelings about nature are at different removes from it. There will be elements of things seen even in the most abstracted impression; otherwise the feeling is likely to disappear and leave an object in its place. At other times feelings remain close to the subject, which is nothing against them; in fact, feelings that leave the subject intact may be freer to develop, in and around the theme

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and independent of it as well." (Ashbery's article on Joan Mitchell is reprinted in his marvelous new collection, *Reported Sightings*.) Mitchell is still giving us that beautifully shaded view of nature. She may be the only person working in an Abstract Expressionist vein right now who does paintings that aren't objects. The feeling, experienced at some remove from nature that is somehow not a remove from nature, draws us in and carries us along.

These are paintings in which direct experience has been shaded and transformed. The best Mitchells are authentically civilized experiences. Our appetites are focused and clarified. Her colors are the beautiful colors of the world: tans of flesh and greens of landscape, but also the purple of the iris and the tawny yellow of the pear.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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On "Sexual Personae" *by Roger Kimball*
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Raymond Aron *by David Gress*
Robert Moskowitz at MOMA *by Eric Gibson*
Winston Churchill as a young writer *by David Fromkin*
Randall Jarrell *by Bruce Bawer*

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Music

Refurbishing Caruso and company

by Samuel Lipman

A recent spate of fresh transfers of early 78 RPM vocal discs—those dating from the pre-electrical recording days before 1925 and thus made by the acoustic process—has again focused attention on what are undoubted musical treasures. The recognition of their value is nothing new; our forebears found them to be wonderful, and often said that so splendid was their reproduction of the great voices they preserve that the records could hardly be told apart from the live originals. But what is treasurable about the records for us today is hardly their primitive and constricted reproduction, dim in musical tone and full of loud and grating unmusical noise (caused by the abrasive shellac compound of which they were made) when played back directly on even the best and most up-to-date equipment; the discs are wonderful because they provide our only evidence in sound of a Golden Age of Singing, an age associated with Enrico Caruso, Luisa Tetrazzini, Nellie Melba, Giovanni Martinelli, Rosa Ponselle, and scores of other remarkable vocal artists.

Not surprisingly, there is no real agreement on how these treasures should be made available to listeners today. They were originally recorded through purely mechanical means, by singing or playing into the large end of a horn, which looked rather like a megaphone; the horn focused the sound on a vibrating needle that incised a groove into a rotating spring-driven disc of soft wax. The final disc was pressed from a stamper made from the wax original, and played back—again without electricity—on wind-up phonographs (called "Victrolas" in America), with a steel needle encased in a heavy pickup re-tracing the grooves. Completing the reversal of the recording process, the sound emerged not from an electrically driven loudspeaker (as is the case today), but from a bulky horn similar in conception to the horn that had been used in recording, but looking less like a megaphone and more like an enormous ear trumpet.

It was a time when everyone tried his hand at invention, spending countless hours experimenting with the design of the playback tone-arm and horn—often coming up with gadgets either trivial or bizarre or both. The British novelist Compton Mackenzie (the founder of the English magazine *Gramophone*, and for many years a powerful and much read, albeit amateur, record critic) devoted extended and fascinating passages in his memoirs to the search for the perfect, or at least the best possible, acoustic gramophone.

With the introduction of electrical recording after 1925, it was immediately realized that the new process far outstripped the old in its ability to record solo instruments and instrumental ensembles in a faithful manner. The situation with vocal records was not so clear. Though many admired new singers were to be found on the new electrical recordings, and though

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famous singers who had made acoustic records—and who were lucky enough to be alive and functioning into the new era—rushed to re-record their specialties by electrical means, connoisseurs of singing were not quick to applaud the new developments. For these knowledgeable and finicky specialists, operatic performance in the second quarter of our century simply didn't measure up to what had gone on in the first quarter; for them, the Golden Age of Singing now existed only on records.

More was involved in the connoisseurs' rejection of the new records than a love for the old singers. It was not simply that the new singers didn't seem to be as good as the old; for the connoisseurs, the acoustic process—both in recording and in playback—captured the affecting vocal personalities of their heroes in some ineffable way that the electrical process didn't. Clearly it was impossible to bring retired or dead singers back to live performance. The next best thing, therefore, was to cherish their supposedly outdated records; for the most sophisticated of experts, the recapture of the past also meant playing back the original records the way they been meant to be played back: through acoustic phonographs, with their spring-driven motors, heavy pickups, and outlandish horns.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that electricity won the phonograph war, even the war of the vocal records. By the 1930s, attempts were being made to re-process the early discs for a new public. Thus the Caruso acoustics were re-recorded, with a brash, electrically recorded orchestral accompaniment superimposed on the faint acoustically recorded original; this combination of a voice recorded by one process and an orchestra recorded by another made no converts. With the subsequent arrival of magnetic tape as the intermediate step between the original disc and the final transfer, however, it began to be possible to attempt a major re-processing of the early discs. Clicks could be easily removed by tape editing; scratch could be filtered out, not just by cutting down the high frequencies, but by using sophisticated electronic circuitry to identify where the scratch was concentrated on the frequency band, and then removing just the scratch, without altering (or so the claim went) the "true" sound of the voice.

The years after 1950 were indeed banner ones for the re-issue of the great vocal (and instrumental) performances contained on early recordings. Because of its extraordinary backlist, the world leader in such re-issues was (as it is to this day) EMI in London, for whom Anthony Griffith oversaw dozens of LP collections of classic discs. In the 1980s, his successor at EMI, the just-retired Keith Hardwick, was responsible for a plethora of such transfers, including the synoptic forty-seven LPs of *The Record of Singing* (1889-1989),[1] the seven LPs of *Wagner on Record 1926-1942*,[2] the eight LPs of *Schubert Lieder on Record 1898-1952*,[3] the eight LPs of *Schumann and Brahms Lieder on Record 1901-1952*,[4] and the eight LPs of *The Hugo Wolf Society*.[5]

For many listeners, these LPs were a revelation. Not only was there a profusion of wonderful performances, both vocal and musical, on these re-issues; in a technological sense, they seemed to have been improved out of all relation to what one had remembered of their original sound. All the clicks and pops were now gone; the hitherto obtrusive hiss and scratch had been reduced in many cases to practical inaudibility; the vocal tone was smooth, unforced, and surprisingly natural. Despite the general satisfaction with the results of the new processing methods, it cannot be said that these re-issues won over the most dedicated collectors. These hardy souls continued to

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1 EMI LP RLS 7705 (Volume One, Part One), RLS 7706 (Volume One, Part Two), HLM 7164 (Supplement); RLS 743 (Volume Two); EMI Seraphim LP 1M-6143 (Volume Three); EMI Seraphim LP 1H-6150 (Volume Four).

2 EMI LP Seraphim 1G-6130.

3 EMI LP RLS 766.

4 EMI LP RLS 1547003.

5 EMI LP RLS 759.

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cherish their acoustic and early electrical discs, and to maintain strenuously that what was widely called an improvement in the sound of the originals was merely what might be called distortion by prettification. For these aficionados of sonic primitivism, any lessening of hiss and scratch, any rounding off at all of the rough edges of the original recording process, removed the very essence of these immortal singers, and thus perpetrated a crime against art.

In any case, by the late 1970s a few engineers were no longer content with removing crackles and pops, or with merely electronic methods of filtering out hiss and scratch and smoothing out tone quality. Now the computer was brought to the problem of refurbishing old records. The artist selected for such treatment was, not surprisingly, Caruso. Of all the opera singers in our century, Caruso captured the most hearts, and through his hundreds of recordings he has remained the longest in our memories. The problem with the original Caruso discs—one not really dealt with by the transfer methods I have been discussing—was that, because they were made by the acoustic process, they were indelibly marked by a certain hollow, artificial sound. It was well and good for the sophisticated to say that this curious hooting quality was part of the true Caruso voice; such an acceptance of the inevitable could not but seem benighted when computer analysis was available to explain, and digital sampling was available to eliminate, a feature so distressing to most listeners.

The computer specialist charged with rescuing Caruso—if rescuing is the word—was Thomas Stockham, who through the good offices of RCA was made responsible for bringing out a complete LP edition of the singer's records. Stockham decided that what disfigured the Caruso performances was the distortion produced by the design of the recording horn itself. He found that the horn, in concentrating the voice, gave it (in his own words) "a sound you would achieve by talking while cupping your hands in front of your mouth." Furthermore, the horn overemphasized certain frequencies and caused them to boom. Through identifying just which frequencies were at fault, Stockham was able to reduce them to their proper level, and to produce what seemed to him a balanced sound.

In the case of the Stockham Caruso transfers, the proof lay in the listening. Stockham gave us a younger, vastly less strident, almost crooning Caruso. The new sound was indeed more even and predictable, and the effect was mightily impressive. But because the frequency distortion characteristics of each individual recording horn were different, and because each new set of conditions required exhaustive mathematical analysis to identify and correct, the Stockham method unfortunately seemed of less than general application; to this date, such radical computer-assisted reconstruction does not seem to have been widely employed for the work of other artists.

Given the importance of the material preserved on early records, it is good that the attempt to make them available in the most satisfying way continues. This past fall, yet another approach to transferring early 78s was brought before the public in Europe and in this country. Called "Natural Ambisonic Transfer" by Nimbus, the English company responsible for its development and marketing, this audacious technique represents a lessening of advanced technological intrusion into the process of making these discs available on CD to a contemporary public. The Nimbus method, based upon preliminary work by the noted collector Norman White, uses live re-recording of the originals rather than purely internal transfer through electronic circuitry. It can be simply put: at least superficially, transferring à la Nimbus is nothing more than recording, with a special microphone, the original discs as they are played back on an acoustic gramophone (complete with enormous horn!) placed in a small concert hall.

There is one further essential refinement in the Nimbus process, though it is hardly

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a new one. The needle used to play the old records is not tipped with diamond, as today's reproducing styli are; nor is it made of steel, as needles were during the acoustic era. Instead, Nimbus uses what is variously called a cactus, thorn, or fibre needle.

As all who had the good fortune to play records seriously before the coming of the LP know, what were known in this country as cactus needles provided a dramatic reduction in 78 RPM scratch. Furthermore, the needles seemed to render the tone quality of both acoustic and early electrical records more rounded and rich-toned—in a word, more musical. Cactus needles, it must be said, had their disadvantages as well. They had frequently to be sharpened, in many cases after the playing of each four-minute side. Their welcome reducing of scratch was associated with a lowering of such high-frequency musical information as the discs might contain, though in truth, in the case of acoustic records, there seems to be some doubt that such high frequencies were really present. Finally, it was felt that cactus needles, because they became blunt as they traversed the record grooves, and because they left a residue of minute splinters behind them, in some way irrevocably damaged the records.

But whatever the disadvantages of cactus needles in repeated use, and whatever their theoretical limits in reproducing all the sonic information contained on the discs, there can be little doubt that for most music-loving record collectors of the 1930s and 1940s they sounded better than the gem and metal alternatives. Though clearly more is involved in the new Nimbus transfer process than the choice of reproducing needle—some electronic processing seems to be necessary—it is now difficult to escape the conclusion that (at least in playing early records) cactus needles, in this age of diamond styli, transistors, computers, and lasers, still sound better.

To date, Nimbus has issued five CDs in its series of vocal re-issues, to which it has given the charmingly punning title of Prima Voce ("First Voice"). Two of the CDs are samplers. The first, *Great Singers 1909-1938*,[6] contains a galaxy of recordings by Tetrazzini, Caruso, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, John McCormack, Amelita Galli-Curci, Riccardo Stracciari, Ponselle, Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, Eva Turner, Lawrence Tibbett, Conchita Supervia, Beniamino Gigli, Marian Anderson, Tito Schipa and Mafalda Favero, Claudia Muzio, and Richard Tauber. The second, *Divas 1906-1935*,[7] contains recordings by Tetrazzini (three), Melba, Adelina Patti, Frieda Hempel, Galli-Curci (three), Ponselle, Lotte Lehmann, Turner, Nina Koshetz (two), Eidé Norena, Mária Németh, and Muzio (two). The next CD, not surprisingly, is devoted to some twenty Caruso recordings.[8] A fourth contains seventeen recordings by Martinelli,[9] and the final CD in this first Nimbus release features sixteen recordings by Ponselle.[10]

There is little point here in giving any detailed description of the performances these Nimbus re-issues enshrine. Almost all of the singers on these CDs are known quantities, whose glowing reputations have been kept alive by the continuous availability of their recordings in one form or another. Taken as a group, these artists are glorious in every way: power and quality of voice, technical grace, and force of personality. For many, some of the Nimbus performances will come as discoveries: for me, Frieda Hempel's singing of the Queen of the Night aria from *Die Zauberflöte* of Mozart, and Nina Koshetz's singing of arias by Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin, come as revelations of vocal and interpretive majesty.

In themselves, these Nimbus CDs are completely convincing evidence that there was a Golden Age of Singing in the Italian repertory co-existing with the era of acoustic recording, and extending at least until the

6 Nimbus CD NI 7801.

7 Nimbus CD NI 7802.

8 Nimbus CD NI 7803.

9 Nimbus CD NI 7804.

10 Nimbus CD NI 7805.

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end of the 1920s and perhaps into the 1930s. It must be said, parenthetically, that there is quite correctly no Wagner on these CDs, for the peak of Wagner singing was reached later in the century, in the years stretching roughly from the maturity of Friedrich Schorr and Lauritz Melchior in the mid-1920s to the retirement of Kirsten Flagstad in the early 1950s.

It cannot be repeated too often that the value of these recordings does not lie in their use as models to be rigorously imitated; in any case, only geniuses are able to imitate genius, and such imitation is only allowed to them. For the multitude of undoubtedly talented artists who lack the final and rare distinction of genius, the value of these recordings lies in their freedom and naturalness, their immersion in—and here I must use a phrase that so sadly has been corrupted by the untalented—the joy of singing. For today's singers, these records can provide a needed antidote to our era of painfully inadequate vocal production, of pinched, strained, and ugly hooting—characterless in the bargain—masquerading as profound musicality and exciting drama. Any attendance at live opera in New York, a world artistic capital, provides ample proof of this state of affairs; radio broadcasts from the Metropolitan confirm the evidence of live performance, as do, in a quite shocking fashion, the broadcasts heard around the United States this past fall from the 1989 Bayreuth Festival.

Because the excellence of the music-making these Nimbus CDs contain has by now been established, they will inevitably be judged in terms of their quality as transfers of the originals. As technical achievements, I think that they deserve the highest praise. Though in the past there have been many informative and listenable transfers of early records, the Nimbus CDs are more than informative and listenable: they provide a curiously satisfying kind of pleasure, something akin to the pleasure one feels when eating flavorful food and drinking old wine.

One way of assessing the Nimbus transfers is to compare them with the best of their predecessors, those from EMI and Griffith/Hardwick and from RCA and Stockham. Several comparisons between the Nimbus and EMI transfers of identical original discs deserve mention here. The first involves the transfers of the 1906 recording by the legendary soprano Adelina Patti (1843-1919) of a flamboyant popular song by the Spanish composer Sebastián Yradier (1809-1865).[11] On the Nimbus transfer, Patti's voice is clear, forward, and firm, while on the EMI transfer[12] her voice sounds hesitant and fuzzy. A second Nimbus-EMI comparison is possible between transfers of the 1915 Martinelli recording of "*Come rugiada al cespite*" from Verdi's *Ernani*; once again, the Nimbus transfer is undistorted and somehow pure, while the EMI transfer[13] is cloudy and vague. And a similar judgment of the excellence of the Nimbus transfer of the 1924 Ponselle recording of "*Ernani, involami*," again from *Ernani*, makes the same point about the Nimbus superiority to EMI[14] in clarity.

What of the comparison between the Nimbus Caruso transfers and those on RCA? Here is an opportunity to measure the most technologically up-to-date method of computer improvement of the originals against a relatively primitive and regressive re-recording technique based on what might be called "original instrument" reproduction. Here, in a CD to CD comparison (rather than, as with the transfers I discussed before, a comparison between CDs and LPs), Nimbus again emerges the winner, though by a smaller margin than in the case of EMI. Heard by itself, the RCA/Stockham transfer[15] of the 1911 Caruso recording of "*Se quel guerrier io fossi . . . Celeste Aida*" from

11 In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, this composer's last name is spelled "Iradier."

12 EMI Seraphim LP 60322.

13 *The Record of Singing*, Volume Two, Side Eleven, Band Three.

14 *The Record of Singing*, Volume Two, Side Fifteen, Band Two.

15 RCA CD 5911-2-RC.

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Verdi's *Aida* seems remarkably clear and lifelike; when the Nimbus transfer is heard next to it, the Nimbus seems more dramatic, forceful, direct—to use an already overworked word, more *real*. The same must be said of the two transfers of the 1920 Caruso recording of "*Rachel, quand du Seigneur*" from Halévy's *La Juive*; the RCA transfer sounds a bit like a closely miked radio broadcast, while the Nimbus transfer sounds like a staged performance.

A further point about the Nimbus transfers must be mentioned. Because in a crucial sense they are live re-recordings, made with all the roomy and realistic sonics of an actual concert hall, they compensate for the boxy and cramped acoustic environment in which the originals were first made. There is no hooting to be heard on the Nimbus CDs, only remarkably easy singing. Above all, the voices on Nimbus no longer seem, as they had seemed for so many years, the phonograph's puppet creations, but three-dimensional voices singing in a three-dimensional world.

The Nimbus CDs contain both acoustic and electrical originals, though the majority of them are acoustic. Whereas there can be little doubt that the Nimbus transfers of acoustic originals represent a marked improvement over earlier attempts, the gain in the Nimbus transfers of electrical originals is, though similar, altogether more subtle. The highest compliment that can be paid to these transfers of electrical originals is to say that they are remarkably non-intrusive and, above all, remarkably ingratiating.

Debates will certainly continue about the exact degree of resemblance to the originals that these Nimbus CDs bear—but the debate, by its very nature, will always be inconclusive; at its worst, it degenerates into a quagmire beloved only of pedants. It is enough that the Nimbus Prima Voce series brilliantly succeeds by giving us something of the pleasure that those lucky enough to hear these great singers in the flesh must have felt. I look forward to future Nimbus re-issues with the keenest anticipation; I hope that their offerings of transfers from acoustic and early electrical originals will one day include instrumental as well as vocal material. Pleasure is indeed what these Nimbus CDs have to give their listeners, and, in this area at least, pleasure is enough.

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The Kronos at Alice Tully

by Dana Mack

It takes only a glance at a Kronos Quartet publicity photograph to get the classical music lover's ire up. Perish the thought that these musicians be pictured with their instruments. No, the three men—David Harrington and John Sherba, violins, and Hank Dutt, viola—prefer to be captured in the regalia of hats, sunglasses, and what looks to be (in at least one case) eye makeup. The lady, Joan Jeanrenaud, displays her legs rather than her cello; combined with a cultivated pout, her pose suggests that post-pubescent impudence inimical to any deeper ambition than success at the school dance. Each member of this fashionable string ensemble seems a paradigm of commercial image-making in the punk mode, a self-conscious, self-absorbed *poseur* of the kind that can only ridicule the aspirations of the spirit.

What sort of music might such an ensemble play? The answer is not as obvious as one might think, since the international consensus is that the Kronos Quartet, despite the eccentric attire of its members, fits somewhere in the classical music world. The ensemble recently performed under the auspices of the prestigious Bonn Beethoven Festival and, at least according to the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, enjoyed a straight-faced (if nonplussed) reception. Among the Kronos Quartet's almost exclusively contemporary repertory are, in fact, several earnest works. One wonders why it bothers to include them, since the serious music—of Bartók, usually, and, in its November 25 concert at New York's Alice Tully Hall, the Charles Ives Quartet No. 2—is played so poorly as to beg the listener's sympathies.

Were it not for the peculiarities of the Kronos's musical offerings—which, ranging from Philip Glass and Terry Riley to Ornette Coleman and Jimi Hendrix, cater to middlebrow tastes—this little gang of four would sink into oblivion. It is hardly surprising that knowledgeable critics are loath to compliment their playing. Their lack of ensemble professionalism is well enough indicated by the fact that it takes them a good minute or two to tune up, and the results of even this exercise (performed obsessively in concert) are fruitless. Of course, this quartet's members are not the first examples of musicians who, not being up to the demands of serious music, have turned to popular culture and stage antics for help.

Indeed, since the meat of their repertoire all but precludes concentration or penetration, it does not really matter that they do not play well. What, in fact, is one to *do* with the strains of Astor Piazzolla's *Five Tango Sensations for Quartet and Bandoneon*, premiered at last fall's Alice Tully evening? It is impossible to rehearse such banality. Best just to record it, and synchronize it to a cheap foreign film. In light of their public image as sophisticated solipsists—at least the Kronos's popular sounds do not have the aggressive malevolence of electrified rock

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music—*Tango Sensations* seems made to order.

One has the feeling that the Kronos pays great attention to the creation of an appropriate atmosphere in which to present its wares: nowhere is its emphasis on ambience more apparent than in the modest but meticulously choreographed lighting that accompanies its music. At Alice Tully, for example, the house and stage lights were, as a rule, set abnormally low for chamber music, but were turned up and dimmed again at specific junctures, as if to punctuate the pieces.

The comparative brightness of both auditorium and stage during a performance of Carlos Fariñas's *Tatomaite*, a work for strings and percussion in which the quartet members did double duty, was an especially egregious example of their use of lighting to enhance the mood of the music. Yet one wondered why the ensemble employed such a crutch here. The sound of this work can only be likened to that of fingernails scraping a blackboard. Its effect on the audience could hardly be heightened through the use of theatrical lighting.

Visually, the darkest moment of the evening was the Piazzolla tango entitled "Loving" (unfortunately repeated as an encore). Here, however, kitschy after-hours lighting really *added* something to what was already kitsch music. One had the feeling of having stayed up much too late for the late show on television.

One asks himself why the Kronos bothers with this attention to visual effect. Could it be that the devotees of the ensemble are not primarily devotees of music? On this night, the Kronos audience fell into two categories: a yuppie, tweed-jacketed minority and a glitzy, avant-garde majority. Of the former, one must report a kind of ingenuous respectability accompanying musical ignorance. The nice young couple who sat next to my husband and me remarked that the names in the program were, with one exception, unfamiliar to them. Of all the composers listed—among them Charles Ives

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and Thomas Tallis (whose *Forty-part Motet* was, appallingly, sacrificed to electronic amplification)—Philip Glass was the only one they had heard of.

What seemed important to the avant-garde Kronos public was an indefatigable attention to fashion. There was a remarkable profusion of short black leather skirts; of blunt haircuts; of faces painted white and eyes painted black; of exciting eyeglasses; of silk scarves draped over cashmere; of noses well in the air and mouths exhaling cigarette smoke. An affectation of coolness predominated in the crowd, most people preferring to look past companions with whom they conversed. It might also be mentioned that many in the audience were speaking French—the truest indication that the Kronos Quartet is now à la mode.

What is this public looking for at Alice Tully Hall? One suspects that they seek welcome relief from the brasher New York entertainments—the hopping restaurant and club scene. Certainly the social discipline of the concert hall appeals to their overdeveloped sense of dignity; they are a remarkably sedate and polite (if undiscriminating) audience.

And here, of course, is the rub. If there is anything authentic to be found in the Kronos Quartet, it is the cruel parody of the Western music tradition and its performance rituals. First, there is the ample dose of Philip Glass's minimalism in the string quartet entitled *Buczak*. (Glass's most recent permutations *ad nauseam* seem to reveal a debt to Viennese classicism: these amount to no less than the rape of genius, and the submission of greatness to a game of Chinese water torture.) But no more conscionable is the tendency to fill concert halls with the commercial simulacra of serious genres: film music, as in Piazzolla's case. Or with such trendy "ethnic" sounds as selections by Uganda's Justinian Tamusuza and the Sudan's Hamza El Din. Is a Western institution so laden with tradition as the string quartet truly the appropriate setting for such studied and boring primitivism?

Cognoscenti of the classical repertoire might still regard the Kronos's populist tricks as a vulgar practical joke. But the Kronos audience is not made up of cognoscenti. Nobody laughs audibly, either at the musicians' dress, at their demeanor, or at their mostly mindless repertoire.

The most disturbing recent trend in music is perhaps not the ubiquitous disintegrative approach to high culture—the passion for ridicule, the spiritual homelessness, and the penchant for great, empty gestures—but rather the deliberate confusion of artistic intent in which an utter lack of seriousness presents itself poker-faced to an unsuspecting public. The success of such con-artistry, born of the cynicism of the artists and the ignorance of the audience, is nothing less than frightening.

One can only hope that all of this will pass. The power of fashion is terrible, but fashion is by definition short-lived. The Kronos Quartet was perhaps aware enough of its transitory appeal—and of its ultimate place in modern music's pantheon—when it chose its legendary namesake: the Greek titan Kronos, who once ruled the universe, was not only dethroned but, in the end, exiled.

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Books

Sound and fury

by D. G. Myers

The American university's peculiar ability to breed radical innovation alongside traditionalism—often in the same department, or even in the same scholar—has rarely produced anything so extraordinary as *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.[1] Winner of last year's American Book Award in criticism, it is the chief work to date by the man who, along with Houston A. Baker, Jr., is the acknowledged leader of Afro-American literary criticism. Gates has become even more prominent since the book's publication. He is the latest addition to the English department at Duke University, where he joins such leading critics as Stanley Fish, Fredric Jameson, Frank Lentricchia, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and Jane Tompkins. *The Signifying Monkey*, then, merits particular attention for at least a couple of reasons. At a moment when nearly every university in the country seems to be rushing to hire specialists and arrange courses in Afro-American literature, the book is perhaps the best summary of an influential movement in current literary thought. What's more, it is an example of the sort of work that is now considered front-rank criticism and that scoops up academic prestige.

The Signifying Monkey takes its title from what Gates argues is the central metaphor, "the trope of tropes," in Afro-American literature. There is, according to Gates, an entire series of oral narrative poems about the "signifying monkey" in the black tradition. In its general outlines, the monkey's story goes like this. Although the lion claims to be king of the jungle, everyone knows who the real king is: it is the elephant. The monkey, fed up with the lion's roaring, decides to do something about it. He insults the lion publicly and at length—his "mama" and his "grandmama, too"—and when the lion grows angry, the monkey shrugs that he is merely repeating what the elephant has been saying. Furious, the lion heads out to challenge the elephant, who impassively trounces him. The monkey either gets away with his deception or does not (there are differing versions), but in any event he is a success at "signifying."

It is this concept of signifying, Gates argues, that explains "what we might think of as the discrete black difference" in literature written by blacks. Signifying is both a rhetorical strategy—that is, a method by which Afro-American writers discover what they have to say and in what order—and a principle of Afro-American literary history. Later writers can be seen to have "signified upon" earlier writers—to have imitated them, but with a reversal of their strategy.

The concept of signifying is made to do double duty: first, it enables Gates to create a system of principles for the interpretation of Afro-American literature by locating

1 *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Criticism*, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; Oxford, 318 pages, $10.95.

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principles *within* the tradition of Afro-American literature—a system of interpretation which is (to use his term) "indigenous." But secondly, it enables Gates to fix the tradition, the specific line of descent.

What is the concept of signifying? Gates notes that "few scholars have succeeded in defining it as a full concept," and although he devotes twenty-five pages to the effort, it must be owned that he is little more successful. Gates is best at gathering together other people's definitions. To signify, according to the jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow, is to "hint, to put on an act, boast, make a gesture." The novelist Zora Neale Hurston defines signifying as "a contest in hyperbole carried on for no other reason." In these conceptions, signifying sounds not too different from the traditional category of rhetoric known as "epideictic," a term used for a display piece, a speech the sole purpose of which is to put the orator's gifts on display (*epideixis*), and not with any practical intention. Yet to assimilate black signifying to the "Eurocentric" tradition of classical rhetoric is to lose "what we might think of as the discrete black difference." And so Gates takes pains to track the concept to Africa instead.

Gates discovers the origins of this manner of signifying in the practice of divination among the Fon and Yoruba peoples of West Africa. Although these peoples never invented a system of writing, they possessed a sacred text (which was committed to memory by the priestly class and passed down orally) and a system for interpreting it that was fully developed, which "stood as a readily accessible institutional critique" of the governmental structures of Europe, and acted as a metaphysical challenge to the European tradition of humanism.

Gates condemns "seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European speculations on the absence of writing among Africans and its significance," but he engages in a remarkably similar project. He speculates on the practice of divination among Africans and its significance for literary criticism. Upon examination, the African "discursive and hermeneutic universes," although they do not revolve around writing, turn out to be superior to the European: one is genderless, the other is not; one is open-ended, the other is not; one does not insist upon determinate meanings, the other does; one is not wedded to binary oppositions, to the notion of contradiction, but the other is. "The [African] system simply would collapse," Gates observes, "if it had not placed at its center the principle of interpretation as mediation, and as open-ended." The implication is patent: the African system has remained intact, while the Western tradition has collapsed.

None of this is surprising, given Gates's predilections. What comes as something of a shock is to find that the African system of interpretation is the triumphant vindication—of deconstruction! The African concept of interpretation incorporates, Gates says, "a system of differences and traces" which leads to the "deferral of meaning." And as a consequence, the African system offers a hint of what is to follow upon the collapse of the Eurocentric system of humanism:

> The ultimate indetermination of meaning [Gates says] does not lead the Yoruba to despair; rather, it leads them to return to the text of Ifa [the sacred word of the gods], to consult it regularly, to wrestle with its play of differences, not to invent a meaning, but rather to process a meaning from among the differences, sacrifice to Esu [the gods' interpreter] and the appropriate deity, only to return to explore the process once more.

Thus the function of criticism, as envisioned by Gates.

It is an accident that the black English word *signifying* is also a common term in the vocabulary of deconstruction. The signifier may be the same, as deconstructionists would say, but what's signified by it differs with each use. The terms are mere homonyms; their accidental sameness, though, betrays Gates into offering a

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deconstructionist account. Gates is to be praised for attempting to denote "black difference" as an element of the writing in texts by blacks—as "specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised." But he is less interested in explaining these "specific uses" in such a way as to make them available to modern authors than in accounting for them so as to prepare them "for use in literary theory."

Yet if it is true, as Jacques Derrida says on the dust jacket of Gates's book, that signifying is an "idiom," it follows that these "specific uses of literary language" can be mastered by writers who set themselves to it, that they provide writers with a means of finding something to say. And the passages of dialogue that Gates quotes from Richard Wright's *Lawd Today* suggest as much. The function of criticism, at this point, becomes the stating of the principles behind the practice. When I studied as an undergraduate with Raymond Carver, for instance, he told the anecdote about a friend and fellow writer—William Kittredge, I believe it was—who asked Carver if he had ever noticed that in conversation people tend not to speak consecutively but to speak instead in non sequiturs. Stated like this, the notion gave Carver a new way to write dialogue. One can imagine a writer upon whom an account of signifying would act in much the same way. But not as described by Gates:

> Value, in this art of poeisis, lies in its foregrounding rather than in the invention of a novel signified. We shall see how the nature of the rhyme scheme also stresses the materiality and the priority of the signifier.

The sad fact is that Gates's intentions in *The Signifying Monkey* are mutually exclusive. Gates cannot specify principles of interpretation inside the black tradition without simultaneously upsetting the whole notion of "black difference" upon which the claim for a black tradition rests. For once a principle is stated it becomes *literary*, available to any number of writers and critics, and not merely to blacks. Gates recognizes this. As a "principle of language use," he says, signifying is "not in any way the exclusive property of black people . . . ." To his credit, then, Gates perceives that it would be an error to ascribe the unique characteristics of Afro-American literature to race. But he is not sure what else to ascribe them to. His reasoning runs in circles. Black writers form a tradition. How do you know? They all use the "trope" of signifying. What makes this trope distinctively black? All black writers use it.

Now, one might object that the Afro-American literary tradition is an accomplished historical fact. *The Signifying Monkey* traces a line of descent through Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Quobna Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, and John Jea (authors of slave narratives), through Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker—writers who have already written. It makes no claim about what may yet be done. This makes the Afro-American tradition no less elusive, however. *The Signifying Monkey* announces itself as a work of theory (not of history) and relies upon the frankly ahistorical method of "close reading" to establish the lineaments of the black tradition. It offers no historical argument for the existence of that tradition. The only reason that Gates has chosen to discuss these writers, from Gronniosaw to Walker, is that they are black. He presupposes the tradition, in other words, and then searches for something to bale it together. His argument reduces itself to the claim that a shared dialect—black English—presupposes the likelihood that writers will share certain "tropes," though he never says (a) on what basis these writers, from several different periods of history and regions of the country, can be said to share the same dialect, except on the basis of a physical similarity, or (b) how such similarities result in similar ways of writing.

Secondly, however, any conception of an Afro-American literary tradition founded upon the belief in "black difference" is reactionary. Gates shows how such know-nothingism can come about in his report of

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the Sixties radical H. Rap Brown's disdain for the study of poetry. "[H]is teachers sought to teach him 'poetry,' meaning poems from the Western tradition," Gates says, "when he and his fellows were *making* poetry in the streets." What neither Brown nor Gates appears to have grasped is that the ignorance was manifest on both sides. Brown's teachers failed to understand that poetry is a living art, a body of techniques for producing original work; yet both Brown and Gates fail to understand that poetry is also a canon, a collection of texts that embody techniques which might assist street poets in *making* better poems. Either a tradition is a literary one, in which case it potentially includes anything that can be done within the tradition, or it is a national or racial one, in which case it excludes certain kinds of work.

Gates is more concerned with classification, with identifying and labeling "tropes," than with the theoretical bases of what he is doing; but because he affects a theoretical diction he is considered a theorist. "Theory" for Gates, however, is neither what it is for the scientist (a set of broad propositions that lead to the framing of hypotheses which can be tested) nor for the philosopher (the detailed knowledge of a subject when it is seen to comprise a separate, unified whole). To theorize, for Gates, means simply to cast research findings into the jargon of deconstruction, a.k.a. theory.

What Gates seems unaware of, though, is the extent to which his research into Afro-American signifying belies the tenets of the very theory into which he hopes to convert it. Thus he grounds his arguments upon such concepts as the speaker's intention (the correct or misprized inference of which is the key to the effect of signifying), the sharing of knowledge by members of a speech community (or what E. D. Hirsch, Jr., calls cultural literacy), the distinction between literal and figurative meanings, and a naïve version of the doctrine of literature as an imitation of life. Yet each of these concepts is called into question by deconstruction. This is no great matter, except that it reveals a confusion at the heart of Gates's work. When he attempts to give a coherent portrait of the Afro-American tradition, Gates argues from one set of assumptions. But when he tries to assimilate the tradition to the categories of literary theory, he argues from another contradictory set. The effect is to leave all the assumptions in place.

Nor is Gates to be much preferred as a practical critic. Although he bestows extended treatment upon Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, and Walker's *The Color Purple*, his thesis-mongering, his arduous effort to prove that these books adopt the rhetorical strategy of "signifying," hardly makes them seem enticing. Indeed, Gates has small concern for the critic's traditional job of evaluation. He has set his sights somewhat higher. "Let us hope," he says, "that the gradual erosion of those nationalistic presuppositions that are amply evident in traditional schemes of categorization of the academic study of literature will serve as a model for the abolition of racist and sexist presuppositions in literary studies as well." What Gates contributes to in *The Signifying Monkey*, however, is the tendency to shore up these same presuppositions in the name of eroding them.

Minimalism revisited

Kenneth Baker Minimalism: Art of Circumstance. Abbeville Press, 144 pages, $39.95

Maurice Berger Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s. Harper & Row, 175 pages, $25

reviewed by Eric Gibson

The Sixties must have been a splendid decade in which to come of age—all that upheaval and overturning of conventions. What I saw didn't look particularly wonderful, but then I couldn't know. Having been born just a shade too late to do

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anything more than watch from the periphery, I wasn't really a part of it.

Yet there is little doubt that the Sixties, more than most other decades, had a defining power. Those who actually did participate in its events have been indelibly marked by their experience. Those who missed out, who know about it only from books or their parents' misty-eyed recollections, sound as if they feel cheated when you talk to them—as though fate had dealt them a cruel blow by condemning them to be born too late.

The intoxicating character of the Sixties made itself felt nowhere more prominently than in the arts, as two recent books on Minimalism remind us. Minimalism was a quintessentially Sixties phenomenon. Characterized primarily by a search for aesthetic purity, the movement was also encumbered by an aggressively politicized rhetoric that is pure Sixties cant. The authors of the two books under review—Kenneth Baker, *The* well-known art critic currently on staff at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and Maurice Berger, who teaches art history at Hunter College—are clearly besotted with the Sixties, engrossed in perpetuating or recapturing the countercultural ethos of the period. One is tempted to place their books within the genre of the nostalgic backward look—exemplified by books like Tom Hayden's *Reunion: A Memoir* (1989)—rather than within the ranks of art-historical scholarship. What's even more remarkable is that Berger, the author of the book on Robert Morris, is only thirty-three—too young to have played any role at all during the Sixties.

The rosy-eyed view of the recent past that is presented in these books decisively affects—"skews" might be a better word—their character and therefore their reliability. Baker wants to go back to the Sixties for purely nostalgic reasons, for the pleasure of reliving old issues. He also takes the opportunity to note, in passing, how much worse—how much more shallow—things are today. Berger's desire to rehash the past stems from a sense of frustration about the present. He views the whole period, and in particular the career of Robert Morris, entirely in political terms. As he sees it, the events of the decade constituted an extended attack on bourgeois capitalist society. These events failed to bring about the new order he and many others devoutly wish to create, of course, although Berger himself never actually comes out and acknowledges this. He prefers to credit Morris with a heroic, even catalytic effort and to leave it at that. When Berger says of Morris that he "served as an important conduit for reconciling the interests of the avant-garde with those of the New Left," we know what he means: that Morris is a political model for all artists and that maybe, one day, the story will have a happy ending.

In certain respects Kenneth Baker's book, although it attempts to present a more formal history of the movement, is the more interesting of the two. Not that it tells the reader anything really new about Minimalism. Postwar art movements are typically so thoroughly chronicled at the very moment in which they happen that there is hardly any such thing as unearthing a lost document that might significantly alter our understanding of an artist or period. No, the "interest" in this case lies in the author's perspective. This came as a surprise. I had expected all the idiosyncrasies to be in Berger's book. His view of Minimalism isn't a new one; and—like so much political art criticism today—it is larded with the now-familiar mixture of forced misreadings and willful obscurantism. But Kenneth Baker's book turns out to be the more eccentric reading of Minimalism. He is a critic who has one foot in the Sixties, the other in the Eighties. One minute he talks about works of art, and the next, like Berger, he puts everything in political terms. And when that happens, his ideas become even more outrageous than Berger's.

When Baker looks at Minimalism from his Sixties perspective, he sounds like a man yearning for the good old days, wondering why the party ever had to stop. For him it was "a decade marked by giddy upsurges in

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anarchic democratic sentiment," an obvious relief from the Fifties, which he describes with the ritual cliché as "an age of deadening conformity and bureaucracy [*sic*]."

One of the best things about the art of the period, in his view, was the way it contributed to the atmosphere of giddiness. According to Baker, Minimalist art was characterized by "refractory attitudes." That is, it was shocking, and this seems to be what he misses most about the period. "For almost everyone who sees these works today," he writes in one characteristic passage, "information about them preempts the kind of cold-shower experience the art of Stella and Andre provided when it was new."

But just as one settles into the mood of relaxed nostalgia that Baker creates, he abruptly shifts gears, solemnly trotting out all the old leftist clichés and engaging in shrill political diatribes. Although Baker gives the reader some respectable insights into the aesthetic substance of Minimalist art (he's particularly good on Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings), he also frequently talks about art in terms of "power," "labor," "class," "commodity fetishism," and so on: hallmarks one and all of the politicized critical vocabulary of the Eighties. For example, Baker tells us that Richard Serra's lead Prop Pieces "brought to mind 'lead' as slang for ammunition [and] resonated with prevailing utopian hopes for the downfall of authoritarian structures." Minimalism faded out because its "critical spirit was neutralized by the art business and the general backlash in American society against the liberal spirit of the 1960s and in favor of a kind of self-righteous millenarian avarice."

In what is perhaps his most enthusiastic paean to the Sixties, Baker, writing again of Richard Serra's sculpture, claims that it "reflects the view that alienated subjectivity is a kind of implosion of individuality under the pressures of power, most of which operate openly but unrecognized for what they are . . . . To look at Serra's major works of the past ten years is to feel viscerally that power is an issue in one's own responsiveness to life and that art is—at least potentially—an aid to clarifying this fact."

All this comes together at the end of the book, when Baker devotes a lengthy section to Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* (1971-77), a grid of four hundred vertical steel poles set out in the New Mexico desert. It's a work that Baker considers "the closest thing to a masterpiece to come out of Minimalism." Unfortunately, what he writes about this work is too long to quote in full, but the highlights are astonishing, even by the standards of what we've read already:

> With its perfectly regular sight lines and icy formality, the array of poles suggests some sort of "big science" instrumentation whose function is obscured by unseen tiers of power. (This implication is eerily appropriate in that the resources of the Dia Art Foundation, which funded the work's construction, stemmed from labyrinthine structures of international finance secured ultimately by military power.)
>
> . . . The work is a device for coaxing into consciousness one's worst fears about the present moment and direction of history . . . . the *Lightning Field* acquaints the visitor with the possibility that beauty may be the only conscionable and feasible refuge from history. That is, the apprehension of reality as everywhere *radiant with its being* [Baker's italics] may be the only bearable consciousness of life that does not entail repressing awareness of the horrors of our time. Beauty in this sense is just what the *Lightning Field* makes available even as it gives sculptural anchorage to one's worst forebodings of the world's fate.

Of course, there is the inconvenient fact that since the book's publication there has been progressively less reason to worry about one's "worst fears about the present moment and direction of history." This makes these observations seem more than a little outdated. The mixture of paranoia and outlandishness contained in this passage marks the writer's outlook as vintage Sixties, while its flagrantly political interpretation of the piece could only have been conceived in the Eighties.

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The only thing Baker is more sorry about than the end of the Sixties is the emergence of Minimalist "plunderers" like Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons, whose work he finds characterized by nothing more than "a stale air of inevitability." Berger's book is more wistful. He dwells on what might have been, and Robert Morris is both his prophet and his foil for "rethinking"—for which read "rewriting"—the history of Sixties art. Berger wants us to see Morris's work and all the art of the Sixties as far more "activist" than an aesthetic reading will allow. For Berger, Morris is the paradigm of the *engagé* artist because he didn't restrict himself to a recognizable medium or idiom, the way Donald Judd did with his boxes, for example. Instead he was all over the lot, making volumetric, environmental, and anti-form sculpture, appearing in dance performances, and participating in political demonstrations outside museums.

What this means for Berger is that Morris wasn't interested in making art so much as in engaging in a radical critique of society, works of art, the museum and gallery system, our repressed sexual behavior, and virtually everything else. Two key incidents for Berger and—though he doesn't say it—what appear for him to be the high points of Morris's career, are the Whitney Museum and Tate Gallery "retrospectives" in 1970 and 1971, respectively.

Morris rejected the Whitney's idea of a retrospective, citing his distaste of the way such exhibitions inflate the monetary value of the artist's work. He insisted on building a new site-specific work whose monetary value, Berger writes, "was no greater than the cost of materials and labor," and allowing the public in to watch him assemble it. Berger continues:

> With this installation, Morris attempted to undermine the concept of the exhibition as a cloistered and repressive display of precious objects. By opening up the installation of the work to the spectators, he demystified the process of "artistic creation," converting it into a theater of operations.

In addition, three weeks before its designated conclusion, Morris unexpectedly announced to the press and the museum that he was closing his own "retrospective" in order to protest the Vietnam war and what he saw as "repressive social conditions" in the United States.

At the Tate Gallery in London, Berger tells us, Morris again undertook to subvert the museum by allowing only a slide-show "retrospective" and by building three playground constructions in and on which visitors cavorted. The Tate eventually had to close the show, because Morris's jerry-built constructions had become too popular and were collapsing. Berger, however, sees things differently: "Morris' resistance to the historicism of the retrospective was difficult for the commissioners of the Tate Gallery to accept . . . ." And so it goes. Berger's book is a catalogue of Morris's subversive—"transgressive" is the trendy term for it—actions and gestures in and around the studio, museum, and theater.

But this image of Morris as a kind of artistic Samson, bringing the temple of "formalist fetishization of the object" crashing down, seems rather hollow: a case of wishful thinking rather than fact. For one thing, Morris isn't an artist of sufficient stature to be the Samson figure Berger describes. Even in a book written by one of his admirers, as Berger obviously is, Morris emerges more as a magpie—borrowing what he needs—than an original. Morris's considerable debts to Marcel Duchamp in the early part of his career don't seem to diminish Morris's importance in Berger's eyes. It must also be pointed out that, all the time he was railing against the depredations of capitalist society, Morris was collecting ever more handsome fees for his work from Leo Castelli's gallery.

Finally, Morris's "example," if that is what one would call it, is hardly likely to spawn many imitators, though clearly Berger would like us to believe otherwise. However potent the gestures—be they political or aesthetic—of Morris and the other Minimalists during the Sixties, they all seem

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rather quaint as we enter the Nineties. It's hard to take an individual seriously as a political radical when he leads a demonstration outside the Metropolitan, hears the museum's officials deny every one of the group's demands, and then proclaims to the throng, as did Morris, "I think we have been heard today." Only the rosiest view of the past could turn that particular debacle into a triumph. But then so much Sixties retrospection is composed of just that kind of wishful fantasizing.

The sense of the past

Lyall H. Powers, editor Henry James and Edith Wharton: Letters 1900-1915. Scribner's, 412 pages, $29.95

reviewed by James R. Mellow

Biography, like fiction, is a shaping art. Even the most plodding and pedestrian chronological account of a life bears the mark of a biographer's hand: the sense of evidence culled, compiled, enhanced, managed, meant to establish or emphasize a point, in a way that unedited life seldom affords. It is more likely in the correspondence, published and unpublished, that one finds the runaway untidiness of the subject's everyday life: the stray episodes that do not fit a pattern, the chance relationships that, as often as not, lead nowhere in particular—or, with interesting possibilities, everywhere. In the letters (and in the journals and diaries) one gets the helter-skelter of life as it is lived.

To be sure, volumes of published correspondence are also shaped by literary or legal or commercial considerations. The market value of the letter-writer in question, the danger that some unnoticed bit of gossip may prove libelous, the high publication costs of a project more than likely to run to several volumes—all this may influence an editor and publisher. Lyall H. Powers's authoritative edition of the correspondence of Henry James and Edith Wharton—that distinctive pair of American sensibilities—has, aside from the usual editorial circumstances, a complicating disadvantage: the loss of almost all of Wharton's letters to James. Powers includes all the known letters (167 items) from James to Wharton during the fifteen-year span of their friendship, but only thirteen letters and postcards from Wharton. Several of these were co-signed by Wharton's sometime companion Walter Berry, an American lawyer and devoted Francophile to whom Proust dedicated his *Pastiches et Mélanges*, and who was also a dear friend of James's. On at least two occasions, once in 1909 and again in 1915, James, in fits of depression or concern, made bonfires of his personal papers. (He may have intended to thwart would-be biographers or prying family members, or he may simply have wanted to take his secrets with him to the grave.) Much—or most—of Wharton's part in this correspondence, therefore, has to be inferred from James's responses to her missing letters.

Still, there is a certain fascination in meeting the Edith Wharton that James creates in his half of this correspondence. It is a portrait partly based on his flattering compliments. ("You are indeed my ideal of the dashing Woman," we read in one characteristic passage.) James's baroque commentaries on her far-flung travels while he is grounded at his home in Rye also play their part: "these great globe-rushes & vast gyrations of yours lift you so, for me, far above mortal, or Lamb House, ken, & give me such a sense of the rate at which you are living, learning, plundering & pillaging, that the whole adventure makes me crouch in terror or at least in humility . . . ." In his letters to other friends, however, it is a slightly different Wharton that he depicts: the "Angel of Desolation," he sometimes calls her, complaining about the effect of her whirlwind visits to him: "Suffice it that she had a social 'time' worthy of her general eagle-pounce or eagle flights, of her devouring or desolating, ravaging, burning or destroying energy."

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In a more serious vein, James has Olympian advice for Wharton when she is suffering through a series of marital and emotional crises: "Sit loose & live in the day—don't borrow trouble & remember that nothing happens as we forecast it—but always with interesting &, as it were, refreshing differences." (Memorable advice—particularly to a novelist from a novelist who had learned to use every scrap of experience in his practice.)

The references to Wharton's plight, however, are so often ambiguous and overwrought and cautiously alluded to that without the editor's annotations one would hardly have guessed that her husband Teddy was going through a prolonged mental breakdown, that their marriage was falling apart, and that, at around the same time, Wharton was engaged in a brief but steamy affair with William Morton Fullerton, an American journalist for the London *Times* and a friend of James's. Fullerton, three years Wharton's junior, was one of the host of amiable, frequently handsome, seemingly unattached, obliging, and, biographically speaking, always younger men who hovered on the fringes of wealth in late Victorian or Edwardian society.

The Fullerton affair is hardly new ground, having been explored in the biographies of Wharton and James by R. W. B. Lewis, Leon Edel, and other biographers, but one is still a bit surprised, in reading the letters, at James's devotion and deftness in encouraging the affair between Wharton and Fullerton (even to the extent of participating in an elaborate scheme to pay off a former mistress of Fullerton's who was blackmailing him), at same time he was trying to commiserate, in his eager and inquisitive way, with the misfortunes of Wharton's bumbling and pathetic husband. "Is he absolutely *bien malade*," James wrote to Wharton, ". . . or is he only unexpectedly selfish & perverse? I feel indeed as if I oughtn't to put such questions to you—things take such endless qualifying and explaining; but the questions are only the worriments of my interest & the helplessness of my wonder." It is a typically Jamesian performance; fastidious, incurably curious—yet careful to keep up the appearance of polite and sympathetic inquiry.

Re-reading this episode in the Wharton-James relationship, one is also brought up short by a supposedly extraneous fact: at the time when Teddy Wharton was squandering the fifty thousand dollars or more he had embezzled from his wife's trust funds, using some of the money to buy a house in Boston in which he installed a mistress and, so he confessed to Edith, renting out the remaining rooms to chorus girls, James was in a state of despondency having learned that the New York Edition of his works, on which he had placed such financial hopes, was very far from a success. (His royalties for 1909 to 1911 would amount to only two thousand dollars.) Not that James was indigent. But to the end of her life, it appears, Wharton considered him something of a charity case, commenting in her late memoir, *A Backward Glance*, about the "anxious frugality" that prevailed at Lamb House. James's daily life, she maintained, "was haunted by the spectre of impoverishment, and the dreary pudding or pie of which a quarter or half had been consumed at dinner appeared on the table the next day with its ravages unrepaired."

In her largesse, Wharton provided for chauffeured drives and proper nursing care during James's later illnesses and recoveries (painful bouts of the shingles and the gout; increasingly dangerous attacks of angina, one of which would be the eventual cause of his death in 1916). She attempted to raise subscriptions for his benefit—which greatly annoyed James when he discovered it later. She also managed surreptitiously to arrange for Scribner's, his publisher, to give him a large advance on a new novel. James, in fact, had a comfortable income from family real estate—between seven thousand and nine thousand dollars in the years 1909 and 1910, for instance, as we learn from one of Powers's useful annotations. But it must have depressed him considerably that what was to be the monument of his professional

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career, the New York Edition, should have failed so miserably.

James and Wharton were, perhaps, the last of that breed of novelists who could discuss—with no blush of embarrassment—the moral persuasions of their fictional characters as well as the moral intent of their fictional situations. In one of his letters, James compliments Wharton on the conception of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. "She is very big & true," he wrote, "& very difficult to have *kept* true—& big." Yet he suggests that he might have to return to the United States to deliver a lecture on "the question of the *roman de moeurs* in America—its deadly difficulty," preferring the French term *moeurs*, with its useful conjunction of manners *and* morals. Edith Wharton, in *A Backward Glance*, would speak of the "profound moral beauty" of such late novels of James's as *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, yet at the same time she complained that they were deficient in atmosphere, lacked the "thick nourishing air in which we all live and move"—thus allying herself with those critics who, after James's death, found him too rarefied for modern taste.

Literary discussions play a prominent part in the correspondence—or, at least, in James's half of it. He tosses off a few woeful comments on the works of minor literary colleagues and friends like Mrs. Humphry Ward and the French writer Paul Bourget; he had lost all power to read Mrs. Ward, and Bourget's problem was a creeping form of banality that had invaded not only his style but his "morality" as well. James has acerb comments on the "wastes of desolation" of Joseph Conrad's recent works, and is ambivalently miffed and relieved that he hasn't—unlike Wharton—been asked to contribute to a *Festschrift* for Conrad intended to further the writer's reputation in America. The slight prompts a telling remark: "I *am* glad I haven't your popularity in the U. S.," James writes Wharton; "there are *such* compensations in my obscurity. Truly, there is but *us*!"

Lyall H. Powers's edition of the Henry James-Edith Wharton letters is everything that a scholarly edition should be. Powers, co-editor with Leon Edel of *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, has provided a solid introduction to the volume. As in all good scholarly editions, the annotations reach out into the surrounding context, preserving—as if in amber—a lively drive to Herstmonceux castle in the "charming Napier" of Mrs. Richard Hennessy ("of the Brandy family"), and the rainy afternoon that Lady Ottoline Morrell and her American friend came for lunch and tea. They make the past come alive again.

Where's that rainbow?

Thomas Pynchon Vineland. Little, Brown, 385 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Bruce Bawer

Unless you want to count *Slow Learner*, a collection of his juvenilia that appeared a couple of years back, Thomas Pynchon's new novel, *Vineland*, marks the first time we've heard from this reclusive novelist since *Gravity's Rainbow* screamed across the sky in 1973. And what an event *that* was: if his earlier novels, *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1967), won Pynchon admission into the postmodern canon, *Gravity's Rainbow* certified him, in many academic eyes, as the premier metafictionist of the day. Edward Mendelson's verdict was representative: "This is certainly the most important novel to be published in English in the past thirty years, and it bears all the lineaments of greatness."

Certainly it bore all the lineaments that the most *au courant* academic critics considered essential ingredients of the Great Postmodern American Novel: like its predecessors, it focused less on recognizable human emotions than on impersonal systems and their power; jeered at everything about American life from shopping malls to the military-industrial complex; abounded in vulgar and irreverent jokes, in frivolous, deliberately

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dopey pop-song lyrics, in recondite historical lore, and in scientific material of the sort that baffles, and therefore impresses, the typical English professor (Pynchon, no English major he, studied engineering physics at Cornell in the late Fifties); and, generally speaking, took an anarchic, paranoid, and absurdist view of twentieth-century existence. *Gravity's Rainbow* also shared with its predecessors a distinctive, if ambiguous, vision—a vision of a world beneath whose apparent chaos one may find manifold traces of connectedness, even though those traces may be illusory, and even though that connectedness (if it does exist) is less likely to be a gloriously auspicious sign of universal harmony than a deeply sinister indication of elaborate and evil (and, perhaps, ultimately banal) conspiracy.

What made *Gravity's Rainbow* stand out from its predecessors? Mostly its sheer, unmastered bulk: while *V.* was medium-sized and relatively coherent (comparable in its dimensions and contours to, say, *Catch-22*), and *The Crying of Lot 49* as slender (and meticulously structured) as *Seize the Day*, *Gravity's Rainbow* was huge and chaotic and important-looking, a 760-page doorstop of a book that, crowded to the point of confusion with outrageous characters and symbolic incidents, fairly begged to be—and, in many an English department, was—seen as the contemporary *Ulysses*.

It may or may not be a coincidence (though it's a perfect example of Pynchonian correspondence) that the seventeen-year interval between *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* is identical to that which separated the publication of *Ulysses* from that of *Finnegans Wake*. Not that *Vineland* is anything like *Finnegans Wake*: it's half as long as *Gravity's Rainbow*, at once less ambitious and more accessible. Yet no one could fail to recognize it as a Pynchon novel: the lowbrow witticisms and song lyrics, the highbrow mockery of American life, are all here; the prose is hurried and haphazard, the tone reliably paranoid. And the cast of characters is as wacky (and as colorfully named) as ever: if *The Crying of Lot 49* gave us Oedipa Maas and Pierce Inverarity and Mike Fallopian, and if *V.* offered Herbert Stencil and Benny Profane and the Whole Sick Crew, so *Vineland* contains such picturesque folk as Ditzah and Zipi Pisk, Jewish-princess terrorists; Hector Zuñiga, a TV-obsessed DEA agent; and a rock group called Billy Barf and the Vomitones. And in good Pynchonian fashion, all their lives are intertwined like, well, vines.

Like Pynchon's earlier books, too, *Vineland* features a quest motif: just as *V.* showed the young Herbert Stencil chasing down clues to the identity of the enigmatic woman "V."—who might or might not have been his mother—so *Vineland* centers upon Prairie Wheeler, a wayward California teenager, and her search for Frenesi Gates, the mother she's never known. It's 1984, and Prairie lives with her father, an ex-hippie named Zoyd Wheeler, in northern California's fictitious Vineland County. Zoyd, a relic of the "olden hippie times," subsists on Froot Loops and Nestlé's Quik, and every year does something "publicly crazy"—such as crashing through the window glass at a local tavern—in order to continue qualifying for the government mental-disability check that is his chief means of support.

Zoyd has told Prairie that her mother, a former revolutionary filmmaker, is now in hiding from the government. But the truth is that Frenesi and her current husband, Flash, have long been working for the feds; they're members of the "snitch community," "independent contractors" to the Justice Department who spy on suspected radicals. How did this remarkable state of affairs come to pass? Why did Zoyd and Frenesi (for whom he still carries a torch) part in the first place? And why does Zoyd live this weird, self-defenestrating existence—and why, for that matter, in Vineland? The answers to these questions, as it turns out, are intimately related, and they all involve the remorseless, Javert-like character of Brock Vond, a federal prosecutor who, we come to learn, has played a key role in the lives of both Zoyd and Frenesi.

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It seems no coincidence that *Vineland* began to appear on bookstore shelves in the last days of 1989, for it is, in a very real sense, a book about the Eighties—a decade that Pynchon sees as an "era of greed and its ennoblement," a period of disillusion and betrayal during which reality set in after the romantic adventures of the Sixties. What's more, it is a novel about California, the place where the Eighties are widely thought to have had their apotheosis. Bikers, mobsters, international businessmen, federal agents, showbiz folk—Pynchon works them all, somehow, into his messy, meandering story, which introduces the reader to (among many other things) a New Age establishment called the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives, a device called the Puncutron (which gets "that chi back flowing the right way"), a computer game called "Nukey" (which includes "elements of sex and detonation"), and the Harleyite Order, "a male motorcycle club who for tax purposes had been reconstituted as a group of nuns."

To be sure, Pynchon doesn't confine himself to the Eighties. In numerous flashbacks, he offers fanciful glimpses into the history of twentieth-century leftist activism in California, whose romantic idealism he seems capable of finding both touching and absurd. Flashing back to the Nixon era, for instance, he shows Frenesi as a member of the Death to the Pig Nihilist Film Kollective, and takes us to the College of the Surf, where activist students secede from California and establish the People's Republic of Rock and Roll. And he incorporates several curious science-fictional elements, among them a community of the living dead known as Thanatoids and something called the Ninja Death Touch—a way of programming an enemy's death, months or years hence, simply by touching him in the right way. Pynchon also teases us about the possible existence of UFOs and monsters.

On occasion, Pynchon waxes poetic—and effectively so—about life in the Eighties. There's nothing new, heaven knows, about the idea of the computer as the transcendent symbol of the age, but Pynchon addresses this theme in a fresher, more thoughtful manner than most writers have done, having Frenesi muse at one point that

> If patterns of ones and zeros were "like" patterns of human lives and deaths, if everything about an individual could be represented in a computer record by a long string of ones and zeros, then what kind of creature would be represented by a long string of lives and deaths? It would have to be up one level at least—an angel, a minor god, something in a UFO. It would take eight human lives and deaths just to form one character in this being's name—its complete dossier might take up a considerable piece of the history of the world. We are digits in God's computer.

But even more central to the Eighties than computers, for Pynchon, is television. *Vineland* depicts an America in which almost everyone lives in thrall to the Tube—an America where conversations are routinely packed with references to favorite programs and where people habitually understand their lives in terms of the lives of prime-time protagonists. To Pynchon's mind, it would seem, TV killed the revolution: as Prairie's boyfriend, Isaiah, tells Zoyd: "Whole problem 'th you folks's generation . . . is you believed in your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it—but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato."

Pynchon can be amusing about his characters' obsession with television—and, at times, bleakly plausible. In one passage, for instance, Frenesi's son Justin spends a few moments away from the TV set because the cartoons have gone off and his parents are "the least objectionable programming around here, for half an hour, anyway." It's a cogent, credible touch. But Pynchon doesn't know when to stop: in a tedious running gag, he has his characters watching Pia Zadora in *The Clara Bow Story* (page 14), Pat Sajak in *The Frank Gorshin Story* (page 48), Sean Connery in *The G. Gordon Liddy Story* (page 339), John Ritter in *The Bryant*

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Gumbel Story (page 355), and Pee-wee Herman in *The Robert Musil Story* (page 370). Pynchon's wisecracks about Sajak and Vanna White, furthermore, are worse than passé; and what does it mean that *Vineland* is the second work I've reviewed in the past month that contains prominent references to the theme from "Hawaii Five-O"? (Is some Pynchonesque plot afoot?) Toward the end of the book one may or may not feel that America watches too much television, but one certainly feels that Pynchon watches too much of it.

There is, moreover, a surfeit of stale rhetoric here about the insidious repressiveness of the System and about the phoniness of American freedoms; Pynchon apparently feels compelled, too, to drop a disparaging remark about Nixon or Reagan every few pages, as if to wave his leftist credentials at us. Yet at heart he's less a standard-issue leftist than he is a libertarian, complaining (through a mouthpiece character) that the government seeks to regulate consumption of cigarettes, salt, fat, and the like because of its need to control the public's senses. Pynchon doesn't take into consideration that, in many cases, government interest in regulating such substances came about *against* the wishes of entrenched interests (such as the tobacco lobby) and was, in large part, the result of health faddism that grew directly out of the Sixties counterculture.

But one can't expect Pynchon to acknowledge such complexities: on any given topic, he's desperately eager to construe the facts at hand in the most paranoid manner possible. He argues that government is ruled by a "hatred of anything new," and he is plainly sympathetic to Ditzah's characterization of the "Reagan program" as an attempt to "flee into the past"; but his ubiquitous suspicion of big government, international corporate conglomerates, high technology, and the like would seem to suggest that it is Pynchon, not Reagan, who is the Luddite here. (Nor is Pynchon inclined, by the way, to notice the ways in which the spread of technology and big business can further, rather than hinder, the cause of peace and freedom—for example, the way that the spread of photocopying and FAX machines helped incite and facilitate democratic uprisings in Eastern Europe, or the way that the interlocking of national economies through corporate investment serves to promote world stability.)

In much the same spirit, Pynchon denounces the police dramas on American television for "turning agents of governmental repression into sympathetic heroes," and speaks of these heroes' "routine violations of constitutional rights." But is there any country in the world where the hands of the police have been more tied by the courts, and where criminals have more frequently been released on technicalities? Read in the wake of recent events in Eastern Europe, Pynchon's complaints about the supposed lack of liberty in America look especially shameful; could a Rumanian or Pole read *Vineland* and see in it anything more than the neurotic imaginings of the exceptionally privileged?

For all his anti-American rhetoric, however, Pynchon can be frank and witty about the motives that underlie some people's radical politics. Frenesi's mother, an old-time Hollywood leftist, recognizes that her own radicalism may be prompted by a suppressed attraction to authority figures; and the Pisk sisters' fanaticism is not unrelated to their spoiled-princess mentality. Notwithstanding Pynchon's characterization of Vond as a heartless monster, moreover, the federal prosecutor has insights that his creator clearly regards as valid. "Brock Vond's genius," Pynchon writes, "was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep—if he'd allowed himself to feel it, the sometimes touching—need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family." (One might add that a longing for order on Pynchon's part likewise underlies this novel's anarchy.)

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Fortunately, there are moments in this book when Pynchon seems to acknowledge that there is more to contemporary American life than pop culture, Pop Tarts, the Tube, and the System. For instance, despite his tireless references to show tunes and TV-show themes, his fabrication of such record albums as *The Chipmunks Sing Marvin Hamlisch*, and his own insipid song lyrics ("Oh—Lawrence,/Of Arabia, with his/ Wig, wag, woggledy doo!"), there comes a very nice moment (and it came, interestingly, only a page or so after this reader found himself grumbling aloud, "Why doesn't one person in this book listen to *Bach*, for God's sake?") when Pynchon allows one of his characters, Takeshi Fumimota, to be profoundly moved by the "soul" (Pynchon's word) in Bach's hymn "Wachet Auf." (Yet one wonders: would Takeshi truly be capable, right off the bat, of such a response to Bach?) And it's gratifying to discover that, in Pynchon's view, Zoyd's "belated moment of welcome to planet Earth" comes when he finally throws off his Sixties self-indulgence and recognizes the seriousness of his responsibility to his daughter.

Indeed, the tale that eventually emerges about the long-ago events that led to Zoyd's arrival in Vineland with the infant Prairie is really quite sentimental; handled differently, the novel's plot could almost be that of a TV movie. Could it be because he wants to take the melodramatic curse off his story that Pynchon treats it as a veritable joke, making his characters preposterous and their affections unbelievable? Yet what is he making fun of—his own story, stories in general, the notion of generating empathy for characters? The fact is that it's as easy to deride sentimental effects as to perpetrate them; the difficult thing—which Pynchon fails to do here—is to create characters who are believably and compellingly human. Given the absence of such people in this book, it is hard to care much, one way or another, about the way they live.

As for the novel's ending—in which Prairie finds herself being licked affectionately by a dog, perhaps the only moment of pure and perfect communion between two individuals in the whole book—it would seem to imply that Pynchon doubts there *are* people capable of dispensing the sort of solace that a devoted mutt can provide. It's a very contemporary, very Californian stance, not uncommon among some New Age types. Then again, this final tableau may not be intended seriously—may, on the contrary, be meant as a joke about such people and their attitudes. Or perhaps we're supposed to see it as both potentially serious *and* potentially ludicrous—and this strikes one, on reflection, as the best bet, for *Vineland* is ultimately no mere work of nihilism; it's an example of what one may call meta-nihilism, in which Pynchon not only takes the nihilist's tack of dismissively ridiculing every hint of value or meaning in sight but also appears, at times, to repudiate nihilism itself. Likewise, it's a work of meta-paranoia, in which he laughs at his own paranoia even as he makes a fetish of it. (A rock group called the Paranoids, which appears in Pynchon's earlier work, also shows up here.)

Alas, what one misses, amid all this cleverness, is a firm point of view, a sense that *something*, at least, is not being regarded flippantly; one has the feeling that Pynchon's intentions are serious, but that he doesn't quite know what to take seriously. For all his apparent audacity, indeed, there's an odd skittishness about this book, a seeming fear, on the author's part, of standing still—whether philosophically or otherwise—lest he be caught, classified, known. In a sense, then, Pynchon's jittery, endlessly digressive narrative manner would appear to be not unrelated to his extreme personal secretiveness, especially his reputed tendency to change addresses frequently.

In one chapter of *Vineland*, Frenesi's son Justin, disturbed by his parents' combative behavior, follows a friend's advice to make believe they're television characters. Counsels the friend: "Pretend there's a frame around 'em like the Tube, pretend they're a show you're watching. You can go into it if you want, or you can just watch, and *not* go

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into it." I quote this line because, for all *Vineland*'s merits, the experience of reading it proves to be less like experiencing the lives and sharing the thoughts of other people (as is the case, of course, in most of the finest novels) than it is like watching something passively on TV. To paraphrase the boy, one watches the people in *Vineland*, but one doesn't go into their lives; one is told of Prairie's longing for her mother and of Zoyd's love for Prairie, but one doesn't feel as if one has truly encountered these emotions. The problem is that Pynchon hasn't created actual characters here (or—for all his keen, scattershot particulars about California life—established actual settings): instead, he's cobbled people together out of goofy habits, funny accents, zany *curricula vitae*; he specializes in introducing utterly bizarre phenomena and dropping them abruptly, in sudden (and often confusing) flashbacks and flashforwards, and in elaborate intercontinental trips that he covers in a single sentence. It's a bedlam, though, that soon grows tiresome. If this book proves anything, it is that shuttling at an unvarying, hectic clip from city to city, from one time frame to another, and from one character's consciousness to another's can be as monotonous as staying, for the length of an entire book, with a single protagonist in a quiet room. If anything, it is *more* monotonous—for Pynchon darts about so restlessly that he never has time to scratch anyone's surface.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of two new books, Joseph Frank's *Through the Russian Prism: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Princeton, $29.95; $9.95 paper) and Jeffrey Hart's *Acts of Recovery: Essays on Culture and Politics* (Dartmouth/University Press of New England, $19.95). Some of the essays in these collections were originally published in *The New Criterion.*

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Notebook

History vs. ideology

by David Gress

Americans, we often hear, are uninterested in history. Certainly there has been nothing in this country to compare to the quite extraordinary revival of narrative historiography in the 1980s in virtually every European country. In the major countries—Britain, France, Germany, Italy—several multivolume works on national history compete for attention, each representing distinct methodological, cultural, and narrative traditions. In France, for instance, Fayard's six-volume *Histoire de France* bears the mark of the detailed, documentary scholarship of the Ecole des Chartes, a scholarship focused firmly on politics and the state. This tradition has been unjustly overshadowed abroad by the reputation of the Annales school of social history, whose adherents emphasize "the structures of everyday life." On the other side, Hachette's five lavishly illustrated quarto-format volumes by leading Annalistes like François Furet, Georges Duby, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladourie testify not only that Annalistes are capable of writing brilliantly for le grand public, but that they, too, have made the turn back to questions of politics and of the doctrines and beliefs governing political action. In the smaller countries, the size of the readership dictates that representatives of differing traditions contribute to a single grand enterprise; one example is the sixteen-volume *History of Denmark*, edited by Olaf Olsen, the Keeper of Antiquities at the National Museum in Copenhagen.

The Danish example is quite instructive for anyone who contemplates the state of the discipline in America. This was abundantly evident at the American Historical Association's 104th annual meeting, held in the last days of 1989 in San Francisco, where close to two thousand historians congregated to discuss a broad range of historical subjects.[1] First, like Americans, Danes are supposed to be ahistorical and intellectually lazy. Second, Mr. Olsen, the Danish *History*'s general editor, was for many years fashionably interested in Marxism and Maoism, despite—or maybe because of—the fact that his field was Viking history. The son of a Communist historian who was notorious for his sarcastic harassment of students he considered "bourgeois," Mr. Olsen followed the trajectory of the academy in the 1970s, but has now returned to a less ideological position, interested, once more, in what the past was and not in how it should be judged by contemporary preferences. Third, these volumes, like their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, are uniformly well written, disproving the claim that the results of serious, up-to-date scholarship cannot be rendered in commonly understood language, or that the issues of history cannot be made interesting to the ordinary citizen.

1 The 104th meeting of the American Historical Association took place at the Hilton and St. Francis hotels in San Francisco from December 28 to December 30, 1989.

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And fourth, forty thousand subscriptions to the sixteen-volume set, at a price of about seven hundred fifty dollars, have been sold so far in a country of five million, where print runs of less than one thousand copies are standard for works of fiction, and where serious nonfiction often cannot be published without generous public support. This corresponds to sales of about two million copies in the United States. Can anyone imagine publishing a history of the United States—or any combination of histories—on that scale and at such a price, and managing to sell two million copies?

If the answer is no, it has a good deal to do with what many American historians think they ought to be doing and how they ought to do it. Unlike their leading European colleagues, they have not stopped fighting the ideological battles of the 1960s, even though the victors in those battles are now in control of the academy and its hiring process. These historians seem more interested in tormenting the records of the past to fit currently dominant intellectual predilections than in writing works of general interest or significance, works of broad narrative history that might bridge the gap between original research in specialized fields and the much-lamented historical ignorance of the American public. In fact, American historians sneer at those who do undertake that task, which was formerly considered an essential cultural activity. Simon Schama, the author of *Citizens*, the best-selling history of the French Revolution that appeared in 1989, has come in for particular denigration on this score.[2]

One important current preoccupation of the American historical profession is feminism—not, of course, as a subject of study, but as a political effort to import the agenda of upper-middle-class American feminism of the late 1980s into the study and interpretation of the past. The theme of the meeting in San Francisco (although other topics were discussed as well) was the French Revolution, a subject one would have thought to be of some general interest. Nevertheless, the main local news story about the meeting, in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, announced "Feminism on Historians' Agenda" and featured an interview with Ellen Friedman of Boston College. In the article, Professor Friedman announced gleefully that "women's history is expanding its influence in the universities, which are becoming more receptive to a feminist view of the past." Not a word about the main theme of the meeting or, indeed, about the important controversies concerning the French Revolution and the legacy of revolution in general, controversies that help explain the world-historical changes we are now witnessing in Eastern Europe. As far as Professor Friedman was concerned, the most important aspect of this annual meeting was that women were now found on all the panels: "there is representation and participation everywhere . . . . I keep hearing we're in the post-feminist age . . . but the academy tells a different story."

Indeed it does. About a year and a half ago, when the program of this meeting was being put together, I suggested to one of my local colleagues that the meeting might include a panel on the expansion of state power in Western Europe in the early modern period (1500-1800). Not only was this subject of some general interest, including as it did the changing role of politics and religion in Western societies, the methods and institutions of power, and the role of war in promoting or hampering political change. It was also an area that in recent years had seen some of the most exciting scholarship in any area of European history. The response I got was surprising: "Well, yes, why don't you go ahead and propose a panel on that. By the way, you should know that the program committee will not consider a panel proposal that does not include at least one woman, so be sure you find one." I already knew that the American academy was hopelessly ideologized, far more so than the European universities had been even in the worst days

2 *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, by Simon Schama; Knopf, 948 pages, $29.95.

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after 1968. But somehow it had not occurred even to me that people I still naïvely persisted in thinking of as serious historians would regard the sexual composition of a panel as more important than the substantive interest of the subject to be discussed.

In the event, I had too many other commitments at the time to propose a panel, but I did not forget the admonition. In San Francisco I verified that, of the one hundred forty-odd panels, none was without at least one female participant, and there was a solid core of all-female panels (all of them with feminist subjects). Had I not had the earlier conversation, I would doubtless not have noticed this. With that conversation in mind, however, I naturally found myself wondering how many women panelists had been included for quota reasons, and how many because they happened to be among the best people for that particular subject. I also wondered to what extent panel subjects themselves were now subject to a sort of censorship: in other words, a decree that the annual meeting will only discuss subjects of interest to feminist historians. Finally, I speculated (dangerous thought) to what extent subservience to this crude form of feminism was now a litmus test for appointment in the academy, a speculation I may at some point have cause to test. I don't know if Professor Friedman cares about this, or cares that other women historians are being treated—and, evidently, choose to treat themselves—as components of a quota. Probably not. But the underlying assumption is quite troubling for anyone concerned with the future and the broader relevance of history as a cultural activity.

The very notion of history as a cultural activity had an alien ring at the meeting. I almost said an "archaic" ring until I recalled the very different situation in Europe. There, as I have said, the profession has largely recovered from the illnesses that so viciously beset its American members. There are, certainly, many European historians who think that history should leave out politics and focus on daily life, social beliefs, and the supposedly ignored achievements of women and minorities. The undeniable fact, however, is that leading historians in every European country have dared, once again, to say that history should play a role in contemporary culture, and that it can only play such a role if it is about the important things—about the passions, conflicts, and beliefs of the past and about how those beliefs have produced the modern world. These historians have also understood that the only way to make good on these promises is to write, and to write well, in order to bring the drama of the past to life for modern audiences.

One who has done this magnificently is François Furet, who is probably today the world's leading authority on the French Revolution. He was, naturally, present at the AHA meeting, though none of the local media found it worthwhile to interview the man who single-handedly overturned the Jacobin and Marxist orthodoxy that was dominant for almost a century in French revolutionary historiography. Furet is in many ways an awkward figure for contemporary American historians. He began as a fully accredited Annaliste in the 1960s, emerging from the school of Fernand Braudel at the old Sixth Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. As early as 1965, he infuriated the guardians of Jacobin-Marxist orthodoxy by producing a political history of the French Revolution that dared to point out its negative aspects, and to argue that the Terror of 1792-94 was not a justified necessity but a prefiguration of modern totalitarianism that grew naturally from the egalitarian extremism and moralism of the revolutionary leaders. In his most recent work, Furet takes a more positive view of the Revolution as a whole, viewing it as the first consistent experiment in political democracy. He has also argued in France that the Revolution is, finally, "over," and that the French should now learn to see its passions and divisions as part of their past and culture, but not as reasons for internecine hatred and conflict today. During the bicentennial celebrations of

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1989, Furet appeared on innumerable talk shows and magazine covers, earning nationwide recognition and proving a popular interest in events of two hundred years past—an interest that sparked some contempt at the AHA meeting.

This was evident at a panel discussing "The Origins of the French Revolution." Michel Vovelle, a French colleague of Furet's who is still committed to an old-style Annaliste focus on attitudes and their social constraints as determinants of behavior, rather than on politics, could not attend the meeting but sent in a paper criticizing Furet for having changed his mind too often. According to Vovelle, "Furet I" was crudely anti-Jacobin and anti-Communist (Vovelle is himself a Communist), "Furet II" believed that people might have political beliefs independent of their social origins or earlier world view, and, in 1989, "Furet III" simply popularized the conservative view that the Revolution was over and that a liberal democracy was the standard of the future. Very curiously for a Communist, Vovelle went on to argue that the Revolution was not over at all, as could easily be seen from Eastern Europe: there, as in France in 1789, the people were rebelling against arbitrary rule that had lost all legitimacy; there, as in France, a sophisticated public opinion and articulated political culture had developed too far to tolerate the limits imposed by an archaic despotism. Unfortunately, Furet was not at hand on this panel to make the obvious retort: that the East Europeans wanted freedom, not terror, and that the East European dictatorships were the true heirs of the revolutionaries who seized absolute power in the name of the people in order to institute brutal oppression.

In a panel devoted to his own work, Furet maintained that he had not contradicted himself, only deepened and broadened his views. In the 1960s and 1970s, he had to make the case that a non-Marxist and non-Jacobin interpretation of the Revolution was serious, not merely an expression of counterrevolutionary resentment. When it became clear, by the early 1980s, that the evidence did not support the Marxist view that the Revolution was a struggle between bourgeois and nobles and that it represented the victory of industrial capitalism in France, Furet could go on to a more general study of what the revolutionaries believed, and how much popular support they in fact had. The result of this work appeared in Furet's 1988 volume in Hachette's *Histoire de France*, which I mentioned above. Setting the Revolution in the context and the continuity of French history from the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, Furet saw it primarily as an explosion of genuine democratic ideology, growing out of the Enlightenment and the broad, sophisticated public opinion that existed in France by the 1780s. As the first experiment in true democracy in Europe, it was not a failure, though the Terror showed that it would be a long time before stable democracy would be possible in France.

If Furet is right that the Revolution was above all a political phenomenon, neither predetermined by class structure or beliefs, nor driven by deep social forces beyond individual control, he has undermined an important pillar of the leftist version of history. That this is clear to many of the Left emerged from an impassioned plea by a young American historian, Gary Kates, for historians not to "abandon the Revolution" to the conservatives. In recent years, the Left has seen revolutionary societies around the world collapse in ignominy or sink into the kind of desperate poverty that they inevitably produce. In order to maintain the progressive, socialist world view in the classroom, leftist historians had two choices: either to jump aboard the bandwagon of feminist, social, and black history, with its wide spectrum of methods for attacking American democracy as flawed and useless, or to emphasize the French and Russian Revolutions of the past as great steps forward (whatever some of their consequences might have been). If serious scholars can now show that even the French Revolution was a failure as far as improving the life of the people was

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concerned, if they can show that it brought not freedom but violence, terror, war, and poverty, the very concept of revolution as a positive notion is in danger.

To counter this, Kates called on historians to prevent the revisionists (Furet, et al.) from imposing their emphasis on politics as the only way to study the French Revolution. If we look at the politics of the day as the main feature of the Revolution, Kates complained, we minimize its impact as a pedagogical tool today. What he meant was that if we study the Revolution honestly we may not be able to use it to advocate radical change today. I could not help wondering precisely what it was in the old Marxist revolutionary legacy that Kates found so valuable: he is a man of my own generation, someone who has had to live through the distortions of scholarship and the social and economic difficulties of academics in the past decade or so, difficulties caused in large part by ideology taking the place of scholarship. Why would he possibly want to strengthen the ideology?

If I drew any one lesson from the meeting, it was that American historians, in too many cases, still have not faced the challenge that Gertrude Himmelfarb posed when she accused the so-called New History of "leaving the politics out," that is, leaving out the one dimension worthy of general interest, the stage for those actions that affect us all. As I have mentioned, this New History is already old in Europe, where it co-exists, often quite happily, with a revived and vigorous political history that explicitly addresses itself to an enlightened and curious public. American historians often give the impression that they do not want to engage the grand issues, write the broad synthetic treatments, or offer the drama and conflict of the past for the edification of the present. In other words, they do not want to sustain our culture because, in many cases, they despise that culture and wish to undermine it. We do have, in America, important living political narrative historians, though many of them are actually of foreign—usually British—origin, like Simon Schama, Geoffrey Parker, and the splendidly promising recent arrival, David Cannadine. But they are a distinct minority. One reason most American academic historians have abandoned the effort to contribute to a sympathetic understanding of our culture is older than current ideology: it has to do with the Teutonic traditions of the American doctoral dissertation, one of whose rules seems to have been: Write all you know as obscurely as possible. Hence the inveterately passive constructions, abstract nouns, and impersonal sentences so prevalent in most American historical writing.

But there are exceptions. The best American work of history of 1988 (and possibly of the decade) was *Battle Cry of Freedom*, an epochal history of the Civil War with all the politics left in, but also with a rich panorama of life in all its aspects: social, familial, spiritual, and economic. And it was written by an American, James McPherson. There was something symbolic in the fact that he was not at the AHA meeting, and that there was not one panel dealing with the political or military history of the Civil War—the most dramatic event in American history, and the one still most familiar to that culturally starved and deprived creature, the common citizen.

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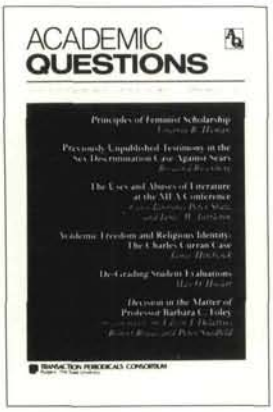
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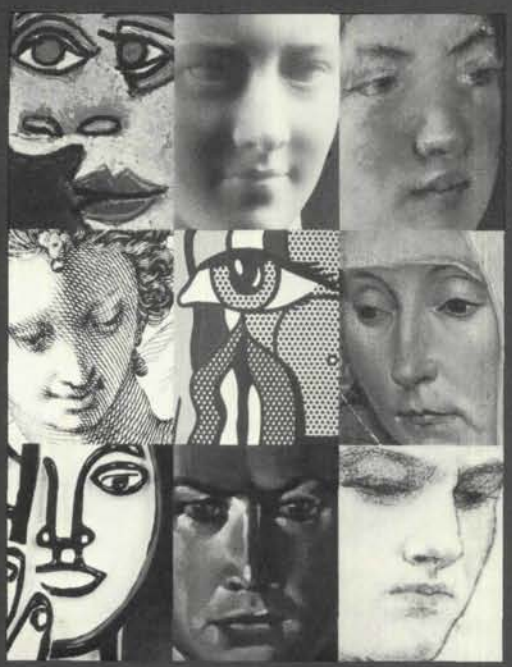

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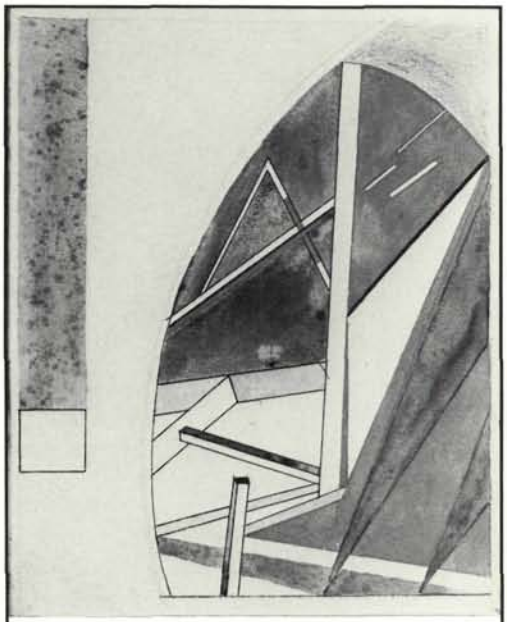

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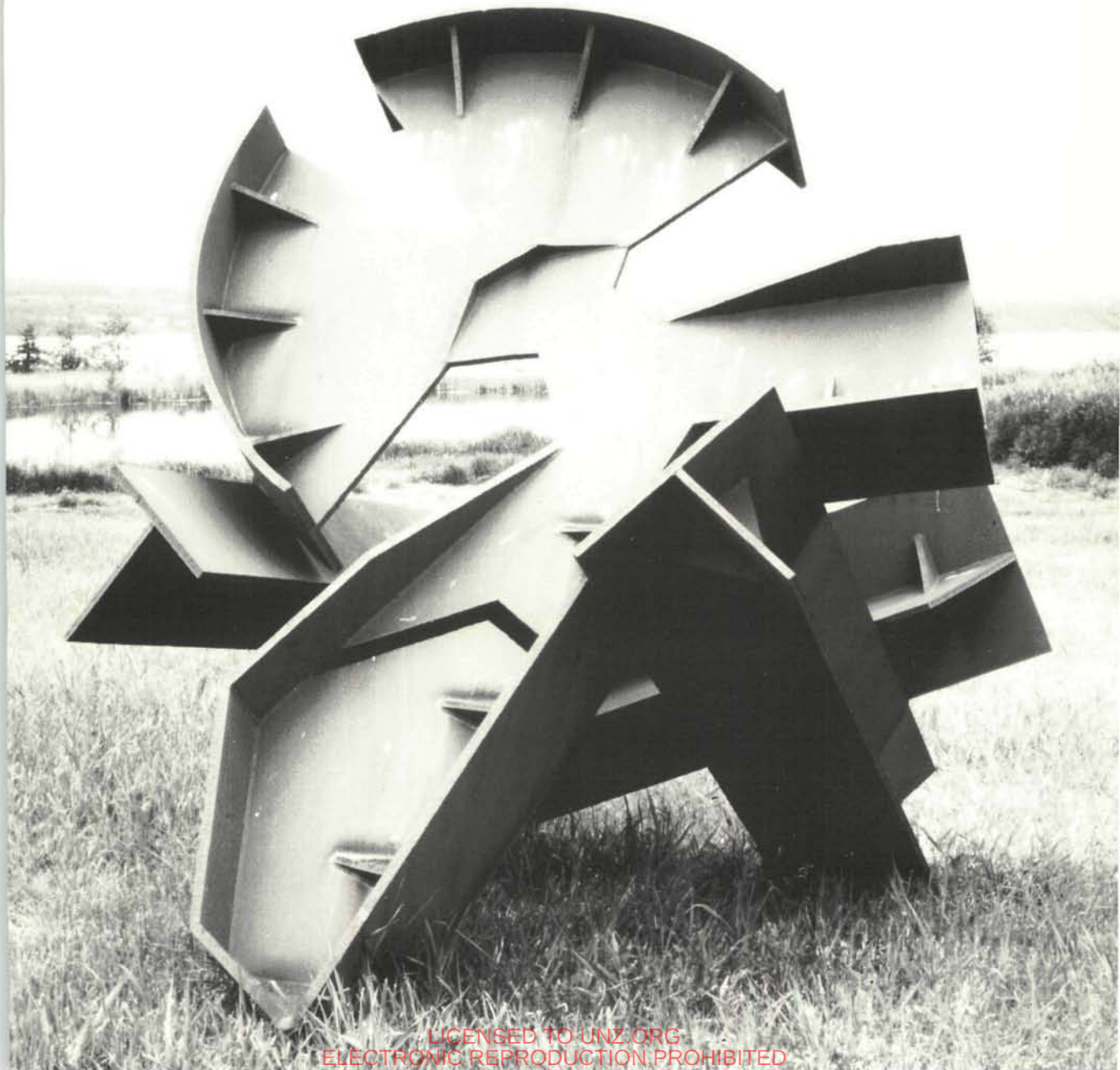

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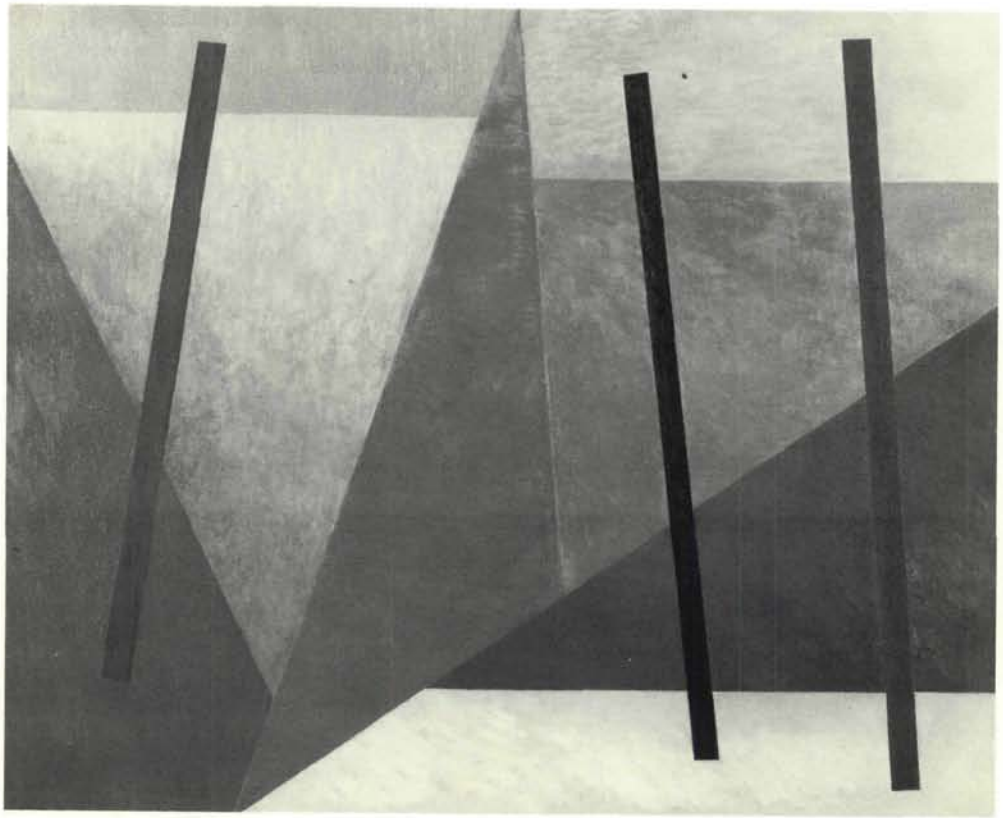

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